

THE SPECTATOR

Putin's victory

Has Russia's leader outwitted the West? By Owen Matthews

I INVENTED
'VIRTUE SIGNALLING'
JAMES BARTHOLOMEW

A REQUIEM FOR
THE PLASTIC BAG
ALEXANDER CHANCELLOR

BRILLIANT BORIS
CHARLES MOORE

WHY IS
IVF STILL
TABOO?
POLLY
MORGAN

MY LAST
POP
COLUMN
MARCUS
BERKMANN



A large, intricate collage of various industrial and scientific images is arranged in the shape of a hand holding a gear. The hand is positioned on the left, with fingers pointing upwards and the palm facing right. The gear is located in the center, with its teeth pointing downwards. The collage includes numerous small images of people working with machinery, electronic components, and laboratory equipment, all set against a white background.

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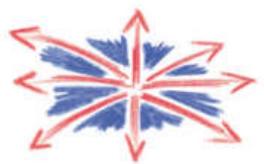
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The Tories must reach out

Political party conferences have, in recent years, felt like an empty ritual. They used to be convened in seaside towns, so grassroots activists could find affordable accommodation. Now they are usually held in cities, so lobbyists can find better restaurants. Activists have been supplanted by members of the political class who are charged £500 a ticket. In the fringe debates, speakers face a volley of questions from people paid to ask them — on pensions, subsidies for green energy and the like. Politicians spend all day talking to journalists, and real politics vanishes.

This year, however, politics has returned. The protesters who shrieked and spat at anyone entering the Tory party conference in Manchester helped remind delegates how things have changed: we're back to a battle of two competing visions of society. Labour has been captured by a resurgent hard left. When Jeremy Corbyn travelled up to join the protesters, he confirmed the very impression that David Cameron sought to convey. The party of government was inside the conference hall. The party of protest was outside.

Remarkably, the Tory party conference is being attended by Tories again. Some 5,500 activists attended this year, the highest figure in the party's history and double that of ten years ago. This is not because David Cameron inspired a surge in party membership (he has done quite the reverse), but because so many now believe that the Tories are more likely to be in power for ten years than for five — so it's worthwhile meeting other Conservatives and comparing notes. The sheer size of the queues in Manchester this week were a sign of a party rejuvenated.

The scenes in Brighton the week before, by contrast, were of a party in its death throes. The Labour party conference held no serious discussion about why the party lost. Instead,

they tut-tutted at voters: in one fringe discussion, the *Daily Mail* was blamed for the fact that 60 per cent of the public support welfare reform (the newspaper is bought by 3 per cent of adults). The general theme of Labour's conference was that the party lost the election because of false consciousness on behalf of the people. The conclusion of Labour's conference was simple: no compromise with the voters.

As leader of the opposition, Jeremy Corbyn should never have attended a protest outside the Tory party conference. Yet this is, to him, the 'new politics'. He is at his most comfortable when addressing crowds of

Now is the time to show why modern Conservatism is the surest way of bringing about a fairer society

sympathisers. He sees a Britain of division and conflict: landlord vs tenant, employer vs worker, rich vs poor. This is not politics, but fantasy — yet in the digital age, it's far easier for those who believe in this fantasy to find each other on social media, pay £3 to vote for a leader and now — amazingly — capture a political party. Hence the Corbyn phenomenon.

The Tory fringe events were devoted to practical subjects: how to better appeal to northern voters, how to promote housing supply, how to help the blue-collar workers whom the Labour party is abandoning. These discussions indicated that Tory members have a better idea than the Tory leadership of the size of the opportunity (and dangers) in front of them.

For example, how will Zac Goldsmith hold on to London, which is, in effect, a Labour city? He is the son of a billionaire who will be standing against the son of an immigrant bus driver — Labour's Sadiq Khan — in a city

which is now one third immigrant. Goldsmith is not endowed with Boris Johnson's energy or eloquence; he is by no means an extrovert, and his shyness could be mistaken for arrogance. His problem is that voters may suspect that Conservatives don't like immigrants. So Theresa May's bizarre speech, claiming that immigration harms Britain's social fabric, plays straight into Labour's hands.

The Home Secretary is right to say that Britain should not accept immigrants at a faster rate than it is able to integrate them. But as with welfare reform, Tories need to take great care in the language they use — to say (as she did) that it is 'impossible' to build a 'cohesive' society in the face of such immigration is unwise and untrue. At present, the Tories have a rare opportunity to appeal to the Labour voters who are dismayed at the Corbyn takeover. Now is the time to show why modern Conservatism is the surest way of bringing about a stronger, fairer society.

It was Boris Johnson who made this point best, in what was easily the most impressive speech of the Tory conference. If crime hits the poorest hardest, then it is the poor who have most to gain from falls in crime. If failing schools hurt the poorest most, then the poor gain most from school reform. It is the Conservative agenda that speaks most powerfully to these issues.

As Labour sinks deeper into crisis and absurdity, a great many voters will be looking for a new home. There is a compelling case for progressive Conservatism, but it was not really made by the party leadership this week. This is not just something that should be crammed into the closing passages of a leader's speech. It is a philosophy that should define everything this government does. The conference season has highlighted Cameron's opportunity. If he wants to seize it, he has much more work to do.



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CONTRIBUTORS

Edmund de Waal's
The White Road: a Pilgrimage of Sorts is published by Chatto and Windus, and his diary is on p. 11.

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Alice Oswald's poetry has won three Forward prizes and a T.S. Eliot prize; her most recent collection is *Memorial*. Her 'Alongside Beans' is on p. 46.

Marcus Berkman's first *Spectator* pop column, on Fleetwood Mac and Microdisney, appeared in May 1987. His last is on p. 48.

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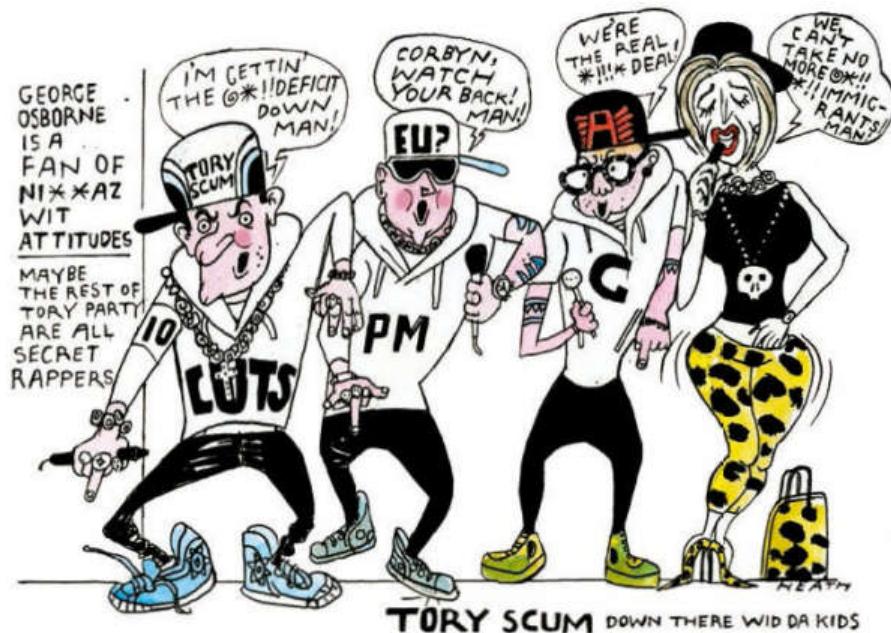
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PORTRAIT OF THE WEEK



Home

David Cameron, the Prime Minister, told the Conservative party conference in Manchester: 'We need a national crusade to get homes built.' George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced that councils would be allowed to set their own business rates and keep all the money they raise. Lord Adonis, the Labour peer, moved to the crossbenches on being appointed by Mr Osborne to head the new National Infrastructure Commission, to assess needs and 'hold any government's feet to the fire if it fails to deliver'.

In a speech to the Tory conference that the Institute of Directors called 'irresponsible rhetoric' and Migration Watch UK called 'thoroughly courageous', Theresa May, the Home Secretary, said that migrants 'who claim asylum after abusing the visa system or having travelled to get here through safe countries' would only be granted a minimum stay of protection. Hundreds of left-wing protesters spat on people waiting to get into the conference. Charlotte Church, the singer turned political activist, said that she was going to write an open letter apologising for their behaviour. Lord Healey, who as Denis Healey served as Defence Secretary, 1964-70, and Chancellor of the Exchequer 1974-79, died, aged 98.

Investors seeking less than a £1,000 holding will be offered priority and a 5 per cent discount in a £2 billion government sale of Lloyds Banking Group shares. Zac Goldsmith was adopted as the

Conservative candidate to run for Mayor of London. Tesco's underlying profits for the first half of the year were £354 million, compared with £779 a year earlier. A seven-year-old girl and a woman in her seventies were killed when a bus, driven by a 77-year-old former mayor, crashed into a branch of Sainsbury's in Coventry. Two men were arrested on suspicion of murder after a policeman was struck by a stolen vehicle and killed on a dual carriageway in Wallasey. Liverpool football club sought to engage Jürgen Klopp, formerly of Borussia Dortmund, as its manager. England became the first host nation to fail to make the knockout stages in Rugby World Cup history.

Abroad

Russia carried out airstrikes in Syria on what it called 'terrorists'; the United States noted that strikes took place where the Islamic State group is not present and that one group hit were CIA-trained opponents of Bashar al-Assad's regime. The Islamic State was reported to have destroyed the Arch of Triumph built in Palmyra by the Romans in the second century AD. Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary-General of Nato, said that Russia had not provided 'any real explanation' for an incident in which it violated Turkish airspace. Turkey told the EU that millions more refugees could flee Syria as the civil war intensified. The EU offered Turkey €1 billion to help refugees, but ignored demands made by its President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for the creation of a safe haven and no-fly zone on Syria's northern

border. Hamburg passed a law allowing the seizure of empty commercial properties in order to house migrants, who were arriving at the rate of 400 a day. At a reception centre in Hamburg-Bergedorf, 200 Syrians and Afghans were involved in a brawl. Flash floods in the French Riviera killed 19 and washed cars away.

The US commander of international forces in Afghanistan said that a hospital 'was mistakenly struck' in an air attack that killed 22, including 12 staff from Médecins Sans Frontières, in the northern Afghan city of Kunduz, which national forces were attempting to win back from the Taliban. After Chris Harper Mercer, aged 26, whose father comes from Lancashire, shot nine people dead in Roseburg, Oregon, the *Roseburg Beacon* newspaper said that a visit was not welcome from President Barack Obama, because he had said, 'This is something we should politicise,' in order to change gun laws. The number of cases of dengue fever in Delhi rose above 7,600 while the city authorities braced themselves for an outbreak of H1N1 swine flu. A new species of pig-nosed rat was discovered on Sulawesi island, Indonesia.

The International Monetary Fund reduced its forecast for global economic growth this year to 3.1 per cent, from the 3.3 per cent it predicted in July. A diner said that a restaurant owner in the Chinese city of Qingdao threatened him with a stick when he refused to pay £160 for 40 prawns that he thought cost £4 for the dish, not £4 for each prawn. CSH



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DIARY

Edmund de Waal

On the top landing of the Royal Academy is the Sackler Sculpture Corridor, a long stony shelf of torsos of gods, martial bodies, heads, a vast foot. At one end Michelangelo's *Taddei Tondo* is hidden behind slightly green glass. It is worth any pilgrimage. At the other end is a modest door into the print room and library. You walk into darkness and drama, steps running down past vast print chests and into a double-height library, lit from oculi above. This is where the marbles and plaster casts used to be housed. It was transformed into a library 25 years ago by H.T. Cadbury-Brown, the architect of the Royal College of Art, and shares with it a decisive sense of structure.

For a few months, until the new year, you can buy a ticket for a fiver and spend some silent time in these rooms. I've displaced a handful of volumes and gathered almost all my favourite white objects in the world. There are paintings by Morandi and Robert Ryman, photographs from Fox Talbot, a Romanesque corbel head, a teapot by Malevich, the porcelain palette of Turner, life masks and death masks of Royal Academicians, an ivory hare, an empty elephant folio. And a copy of *Tristram Shandy*, open at its white page too. My working title for this project was *the nothing that is*, a line from a Wallace Stevens poem, but it has ended up as *white*. Nothing is apparently not much of a draw for punters on Piccadilly. There are no captions in the show but you get given a beautiful pamphlet with drawings of everything. It takes a while to find things, but then libraries always demand time.

This library project opened last week on the same night that I launched my new book, a journey through the history of porcelain. Given that it is a passionate inquiry into why this white material has always had such a hold, I wanted it to be a quiet book. It has been designed by the graphic designer John Morgan, known among austere typographers for his austerity. I realise, now that I have it in my hands, that it looks like a prayer book. An Anglican childhood is hard to dislodge.

And then I go off to Yale University to spend a few days with eight other writers who have been given the Windham



Campbell Prize. We are gathered from South Africa, Nigeria, England, and listen to a speech by Hilton Als, theatre critic of the *New Yorker*, are dined in the Sterling Memorial Library, are celebrated. This library was built in 1930 in High Gothic style and feels like a rich Benedictine abbey before the Reformation. It is warm with leather armchairs and small tables placed as if for drinks. There are stained-glass windows and panelling and stone carvings commemorating the arrival of books in Yale.

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HATTON GARDEN, LONDON

1930 was a good time for cheap labour, said our guide, without missing a beat.

Part of the deal for recipients of the prize is to be involved in a programme of events across the campus, shepherded by students. I was sent to the synagogue for a session on Jewish family stories, to the art gallery to talk about porcelain, to a seminar on museums, to tea with the master of a college. She told me that the university has tried mistress, chancellor, provost, dean, before sticking with master. Students put on an evening of literary speed dating, in which a gong was struck every ten minutes and a new cohort sat down and asked questions. It was organised with formidable warmth.

I took my teenage son out of school for these few days and saw him disappear into classes and lectures, coffee shops and pizza parlours. He emerged ashen from a ping-pong match with Geoff Dyer — also a winner — whose competitive nous is internationally recognised. He gave me a list of the novelists he has dispatched. It made me think how the green rooms at festivals, full of passive-aggressive huddles of writers, agents and journalists, would be improved by ping-pong.

This weekend was the opening of an exhibition at the Artists House at the New Art Centre, near Salisbury. It is a beautiful place; sculpture folding into a proper Arcadian bit of Wiltshire, cows the colour of weathered bronze wandering past a Gormley, or a Richard Long. I'm showing work that I'd made for an exhibition in Orkney with the artist David Ward, a series of small vitrines to go near windows and an installation, *the lost and the found*, of 35 small porcelain vessels, glazed in obsidian, basalt, flinty glazes. They look a bit abraded, as if dug up. You are never confident in Orkney if something has been made, or how old it is, or which tide washed it ashore.

This last week started with white, but it's ended with black pots. I'm not sure how this happened. I better get an answer ready.

Edmund de Waal is a potter, and the author of *The Hare with Amber Eyes* and, most recently, *The White Road*.

The Tories' golden chance

Post-election party conferences usually follow a standard pattern. The winning party slaps itself on the back while the losers fret about how to put together an election-winning coalition. But this year, there's been no talk of compromise or coalition from Labour. They seem happy to be a protest party, unbothered that voters disagree with them on the economy, welfare and immigration. And the Tories, instead of relaxing or moving to the right, have obsessed anxiously about how to broaden their appeal, to make their majority permanent.

This determination to look for new converts is a product of the election campaign. Weeks of looking at polls that indicated they were on course for defeat served as a near-death experience for the Tories. They began to accept that the party needed to expand its electoral base.

One of the usual Tory articles of faith is that anyone can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, that if you work hard, you will get on. But Cameron chose to challenge that in his conference speech: some people in this country have been refused job interviews, he said, just because of their surname. It's what he believes — inside No. 10, it's fashionable to quote Martin Luther King: 'It's all right to tell a man to lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.' But it was also a way of courting ethnic minority voters, who tend to vote Labour.

It wasn't just Cameron who was banging the one-nation drum. Those who want to succeed him were at it as well. George Osborne talked about the need to show the millions of working people who voted Labour in May that the Tories are 'on their side'. Boris Johnson argued, in language one can't imagine Margaret Thatcher ever using, that 'our lives are really a gigantic collective effort'. Even Theresa May's diatribe against immigration was based on the effect that it has on low-income workers.

This attempt to reposition the Tories might be being led from the conference stage, but the party itself has changed, perhaps because so many activists left over gay marriage. In 1981, it squealed with delight when Edwina Currie brandished a pair of handcuffs to the conference hall to demonstrate her tough-on-crime credentials. This year, it gave a heartfelt standing ovation to

Michael Gove for arguing for prisoner rehabilitation because 'we should not compel those who have made mistakes to live lives forever defined by those mistakes'.

The Tories know that their luck won't last for ever, that Labour will at some point drop Jeremy Corbyn as leader. But they believe that his election has given them a once-in-a-generation opportunity to redefine politics. A confidant of David Cameron purrs that this focus shows that the Tories are, once

They know that their luck won't last for ever, that Labour will at some point replace Corbyn as leader

again, serious about power.

Only Europe threatens this Tory harmony. Cameron's pre-election promise means that there must be a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union before the end of 2017.

A major worry for those involved in Cameron's EU renegotiation is that expectations for what he can achieve are too high — especially given the lack of progress so far.

The refugee crisis has given many hope that Cameron might win back some power over the EU's freedom of movement rules. But one of those involved in the renegotiation complains, 'Some cabinet ministers

think everything is changing, that it'll all be a lot easier now. But that's not what we're finding.'

At the top of the Tory party there is a recognition that the biggest challenge for Cameron's successor will be putting the party back together again after the referendum. There is an acceptance that they are bound to be divided on this issue, hence the decision for the party itself to remain neutral during the campaign. Even those in the cabinet who are keenest on staying in the EU believe that at least a third of Tory MPs will back leaving.

To complicate matters, the Europe question is now tangled up with the whole succession issue. When asked to explain May's speech on immigration, several of Cameron's staff offered the same explanation: she's gearing up to lead the Out campaign, they said.

Whether or not this is May's intention, the fact that her speech was seen through this prism by senior Downing Street figures is in itself revealing. Boris Johnson is also reserving his options on Europe. He is not a natural Outer — his father was an MEP and his maternal grandfather was president of the European Commission on Human Rights — but he has always been clear that his position come the referendum will be determined by how successful he thinks the renegotiation has been. Intriguingly, on Tuesday he chose to set a bar he must know Cameron will not get over, declaring: 'It should be up to this Parliament and this country — not to Jean-Claude Juncker — to decide if too many people are coming here.'

There are those who see a benefit in the Tories being split on Europe. One cabinet minister, who is almost certain to campaign for Out, argues that the Tories should want people at the top of both campaigns. He claims that this is the best way to ensure that the referendum doesn't lead to a surge in support for Ukip.

Labour's lurch to the unelectable left means that we could be at the start of a decade or more of Tory majority rule. But for that to happen, the party will have to stay together after the EU referendum. This week suggests that the Tories' desire for power should serve as grounds for a reconciliation.



'That's the best of an allotment: fresh food all year round!'

THE SPECTATOR'S NOTES

Charles Moore

Maybe it was because of the contrast with Theresa May's chilly, disingenuous monotone minutes before, but I really think Boris Johnson's speech to the Conservative party here in Manchester was brilliant. It is a constant puzzle that senior politicians, who spend such ages worrying about how to communicate, do not learn how to make platform speeches. They make basic errors — failing to read autocues, misjudging the timing of applause. They also do not trouble to think about what makes a speech — its combination of light and shade, the sense of an audience of actual human beings both in and outside the hall. In the current cabinet, Mrs May is actively bad, George Osborne (though good in interviews) can establish no connection with his audience, and the Hammonds, Morgans, Hunts etc are dull. Michael Gove is outstanding at more intimate occasions, but still not quite right for the big show. Only David Cameron is actively good at it, and even he is rarely transformative. Boris is not in the cabinet and still has the advantage of irresponsibility. But he has often made quite bad speeches because of winging it. His Manchester effort should be used by students and colleagues (who would have to watch it rather than just read the text) to see how these things can be done. It contained imagination, detail, scorn, vision, wit (of course) and repeated stabs at his leadership rivals so quickly inserted that one only noticed afterwards that they were bleeding. He has a great skill of containing much in little. Study how he used the City Hall citizenship ceremony in which people swear in front of a picture of the Queen as a way of emphasising the Tory commitment to institutions, left-wing Labour's dislike of this country, his own support for immigration and his achievements as Mayor.

With the help of the BBC's *Panorama* this week, the full evil lunacy of the child abuse and murder conspiracy allegations relating to Dolphin Square, Elm House, Leon Brittan, Ted Heath, Field Marshal Lord Bramall etc is now emerging. There is a long, long way to go, however, before



the names are properly cleared and the police have apologised for their disgusting behaviour. There also needs to be a long list drawn up of those in public life and the media who gave credence to these cruel fantasies. The behaviour of Tom Watson MP puts him in the same class as Titus Oates, Noel Pemberton Billing and Senator Joe McCarthy. Many of us tut-tut that Jeremy Corbyn is leader of the Labour party, but it is far more shocking that its deputy leader is Mr Watson.

In February 1984, Denis Healey, who died at the weekend, assailed poor Geoffrey Howe in the House of Commons over the trade union ban in GCHQ. 'Who is the Mephistopheles behind this shabby Faust?', he taunted. In a column for this paper a few days later, I suggested that Healey, rather than Howe, was Faust. It was he, with his parade of learning and his ability to find brilliant reasons for any argument whatever, who had sold his soul to the Devil in return for knowledge. I added that, like Faustus, as rendered by Marlowe, he now (politically) had 'but one bare hour to live', and imagined the Latinate Healey screaming '*Lente, lente currite, noctis equi*' before being damned perpetually. By ill luck, I had already invited Healey to a lunch which fell shortly after the piece appeared. He arrived at Rules and drank a bottle of wine and then a large glass of Armagnac, and was genially and entertainingly rude throughout. At the end, he stood up and hit me quite hard on the chest, exclaiming '*Lente, lente currite, noctis equi*. Fuck you. Fuck you.' In his obituaries, Denis Healey was much praised for having his famous 'hinterland', but I wonder if it wasn't more of a hindrance than a help, adding to his impatience with all the people in politics (99.9 per cent) whom he considered fools.

Sir Geoff Palmer responds again (see Letters, p. 31) about the interview in 1964 when someone who he believes was Keith Joseph told him to go home and grow bananas. Since he insists on the point about Nottingham University, let me explain that I am relying on what he himself said on the programme *The Life Scientific*: that he applied for an MSc at Nottingham but that the interview for it took place at Reading University. I omitted this refinement about Reading from my first piece only because it did not seem important. The key point is why Sir Keith, the minister, at that time, for housing and local government, should have been interviewing applicants for a course sponsored by the Ministry of Agriculture. According to Sir Richard Packer, who joined the Min of Ag in 1967, and eventually became its permanent secretary, 'It is virtually inconceivable that an active politician would have been appointed as a ministry representative on an official committee, and even less conceivable that they would be appointed to a technical committee for which they [Sir Keith] had no relevant qualifications. Such a policy [about the employment of active politicians] had been in place for many decades by the 1960s and was in place long afterwards.' I honestly don't think Sir Keith can have been at young Geoff's interview, to help any university or on behalf of any ministry.

The second volume of my biography of Mrs Thatcher is just published, so there remains one more to write. How do you celebrate the second of three in the right way? I thought about this and decided that, after the excitement of launching the first volume in the Banqueting House, Whitehall, it would be bad luck to try to cap that this time. I suggested to my publishers, Penguin, that we should have no launch party, and wait for a grand finale when volume III actually lands. They jumped at the saving involved. So this is an apology to the many people who deserve a party but won't get one yet. By the time volume III appears, the whole project will have taken 20 years, so I hope the party will be worth the wait.

Putin's triumph

His cynical statecraft in Syria has run rings around the West

OWEN MATTHEWS

Saddam Hussein hanged: is Iraq a better place? A safer place? Gaddafi murdered in front of the viewers: is Libya a better place? Now we are demonising Assad. Can we try to draw lessons?

— Sergei Lavrov, Russian foreign minister, United Nations, 1 October

Russia was right about Iraq and Libya, and America and Britain were dead wrong. Regime change doesn't seem to have changed Middle Eastern countries for the better, as Vladimir Putin has been warning for years. His policy is not to support any armed groups 'that attempt to resolve internal problems through force' — by which he means rebels, 'moderate' or otherwise. In his words, the Kremlin always has 'a nasty feeling that if such armed groups get support from abroad, the situation can end up deadlocked. We never know the true goals of these "freedom fighters" and we are concerned that the region could descend into chaos.'

Yet after a decade and a half of scolding the West for non-UN-sanctioned military interventions, Putin has now unilaterally committed Russian forces to what the former CIA director General David Petraeus calls the 'geopolitical Chernobyl' of Syria. Russia finds itself allied with Syria, Iraq and Iran — a new 'coalition' no less, as Syria's president Bashar al-Assad described it on Iranian state TV last week. How and why did Putin fail to take his own advice about the unintended consequences that breed in middle-eastern quagmires? And most importantly, how has he managed — so far at least — to make Russia's intervention in Syria into something close to a diplomatic triumph?

Russia's decisive intervention has left Barack Obama and David Cameron looking weak and confused. When the usually steadfastly patriotic readers of the *New York Daily News* were asked whether Putin or Obama had 'the stronger arguments', 96 per cent said Putin. In Britain even hawks like Sir Max Hastings — no friend of the Kremlin — are arguing that Russia can help beat Isis. And most importantly, Putin stole the show at the United Nations General Assembly last month with an impassioned speech denouncing the whole US-backed project of democracy in the Middle East at its very root.



The Arab Spring has been a catastrophe, Putin argued, and the western countries who encouraged Arab democrats to rise against their corrupt old rulers opened a Pandora's box of troubles. 'Instead of the triumph of democracy and progress, we got violence, poverty and social disaster,' he told assembled delegates, in remarks aimed squarely at the White House. 'Nobody cares about

Putin knows who his allies are, while the UK and the US are against almost every major group fighting in Syria

human rights, including the right to life. I cannot help asking those who have forced this situation, do you realise what you have done?' It was quite a sight: a Russian president taking the moral high ground against an American president — and getting away with it.

It's a message that encapsulates Putin's world-view. Stability and predictability are better than the uncertainties of democracy and revolution — that's been the Kremlin's line ever since a wave of 'colour' revolutions swept away Putin's allies across the former Soviet bloc. When the Arab Spring obliterated Russian buddies Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, he

had just the same idea. The Assad family — allies that Putin inherited from the days of Leonid Brezhnev — are simply the last of Moscow's allies left standing in a world turned upside down by people power and its unpredictable consequences. In backing Assad, Putin is pushing back not just against the West and its support for democracy, but against the whole idea of popular revolt against authority.

Putin has emerged from his Syria gamble looking decisive because he at least knows who his allies are — and, no less importantly, who his enemies are. The US and UK, on the other hand, are against almost every major group fighting in Syria. The West opposes not just Assad and his allies (in the form of Lebanese Hezbollah forces and Iranian Revolutionary Guards) but almost every one of his opponents, in the form of Islamic State, the al-Qaeda offshoot Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham. True, there are a handful of moderate Syrian Sunni opposition groups which have received arms and training from the CIA. In Washington, you still hear fantasies of an 'apolitical, nonsectarian and highly integrated' new Syrian opposition army being sent forth to hold territory against both Assad and the jihadis, creating an inclusive government for all. Just this

week David Cameron said he wanted Assad out because he would not be accepted by all Syrians. It is as if he still thinks straightforward regime change is possible. That kind of strategy might have sounded good in 2001 — but it's hard to swallow after the utter collapse of US-trained local forces in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

In Syria the most effective US-backed, anti-Islis troops on the ground are the Kurdish rebels of the YPG — but the US has been powerless to stop its Nato ally Turkey from bombing the YPG in retaliation for a Kurdish insurgency inside Turkey that has little to do with the Syrian civil war. Nor has the US been able to protect two of the Syrian Sunni opposition groups that it backs from Moscow's airstrikes — Russian jets have already hit the front-line positions of Tajammu al-Aaza in Talbiseh and Jaish al-Tawhid (part of the Free Syrian Army) on the outskirts of Al-Lataminah. 'On day one, you can say it was a one-time mistake,' a senior US official told the *Wall Street Journal* after an allied rebel group's headquarters was destroyed. 'But on day three and day four, there's no question it's intentional. They know what they're hitting.' Protests by London and Washington have been politely ignored by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, who speaks of 'fighting terrorism together'.

But it's precisely because Putin has been proved right about the dangers of intervention that his own adventure in Syria is likely to end badly. For one, it's a myth that Assad is the main bulwark against Isis in Syria. According to figures from IHS Jane's, only 6 per cent of the Syrian regime army's 982 operations last year were actually directed against Isis. Most of Assad's attacks — including with Scud missiles and the infamous barrel bombs dropped from helicopters on residential areas — targeted groups that opposed Isis, thereby helping pave the way for Isis to take over Raqqa and the oil-fields of northern Syria.

And as Nato found out in Libya, air campaigns can produce unpredictable results. Even with hundreds of thousands of boots on the ground, as the coalition had in Iraq, US commander David Petraeus found that 'you can't kill or capture your way out of an industrial-strength insurgency'.

The Russian operation in Syria is minuscule compared to the vast bases like Camp Victory that Halliburton built for the US military in Iraq, which looked like major airports and boasted full-scale food courts, shopping malls and acres of air-conditioned accommodation. Reports so far show a ship-shape but tiny Russian operation, complete with a field bakery, a portable laundry and a single squadron of aircraft as well as some combat helicopters.

With this relatively small military force, Putin has achieved remarkable diplomatic leverage — and halted any renewed west-

John McDonnell, shadow chancellor in the Corbynite splinter-group, has announced that £120 billion is waiting to be reclaimed from tax avoidance, evasion and other schemes. Nero was equally detached from reality.

The Roman historian Tacitus tells us that in AD 65 a fantasist from Carthage by name of Caesellius Bassus bribed his way into an interview with Nero and told him that on his estate there was hidden a vast quantity of gold, not in coin but in unworked bullion — great columns of it. It had been hidden there, he said, by Dido, the Phoenician queen who had founded Carthage.

Nero was thrilled. Triremes filled with soldiers and rowed by top oarsmen were immediately dispatched, and the escapade

ANCIENT AND MODERN

The Nero of the shadow cabinet



was the talk of the town, the general populace utterly convinced, the sensible taking an alternative view. Sycophantic orators praised the emperor, announcing that earth had invented a new form of fruitfulness, and this windfall must surely signal divine intervention.

Nero's extravagance blossomed on these idle hopes, says Tacitus, and resources were squandered as though they were now guaranteed for years to come; free handouts to the people multiplied, resulting in further national

impoverishment. Meanwhile Caesellius Bassus, followed by the soldiers and hordes of locals commissioned to do the work, having excavated all his own land to no effect, extended operations over a wide area around it, asserting that one or another location had to be the site. Eventually forced to admit defeat, he expressed amazement that, up till then, his dreams had always turned out to be true, and this was the first that had ever let him down. Tacitus ends the story by saying that he was briefly imprisoned, released and had all his property confiscated to compensate for 'Dido's treasure'.

Don't give up on your fantasies, John. Keep on digging. There's treasure buried there somewhere, for sure.

— Peter Jones

ern attempts to depose Assad. But even the Kremlin cannot believe that Russian air power alone can deliver Assad victory. One senior British diplomat in the region expects the Russian airstrikes to be followed up with an Iranian-led ground offensive — possibly led by Iran's general Qasem Soleimani, who visited Moscow earlier this summer. 'That puts Russian-backed guys in the field into hostile contact with US-backed guys,' says the diplomat. 'That's what we used to call a proxy war.'

There is also dangerous potential for direct escalation — deliberate or accidental — with Nato too. Russian and Nato planes could be flying in the same skies against different targets with no co-ordinated traffic control. Already a Russian jet has been intercepted by Turkish Air Force F-16s after allegedly violating Turkish (i.e. Nato) airspace. If Cameron calls for airstrikes on Syria — and the body language from West-

minster suggests that a parliamentary vote is in prospect — then this should give his MPs pause. Why send the RAF into this mess, and risk entanglement with Russia and a far wider conflagration?

Putin's intervention has certainly cast Assad a lifeline. Russian TV regularly shows images of happy Syrians watching Putin on the television with rapt attention, or waving Russian flags. But it may end up prolonging the war, since the Russian deployment has put paid to western plans for a no-fly zone to protect civilians in built-up areas. Assad will doubtless now attempt the impossible — recapturing the 80 per cent of Syria that he has lost since the beginning of the insurgency that has cost 220,000 lives so far. So Russia's intervention may, ironically, end up strengthening the hand of Isis and other Sunni extremists who see Assad's Alawite sect as apostates, who are now backed not only by Shia Iranians but Russian Orthodox infidels too.

But fundamentally, Putin is much more interested in being seen to project Russian power than in fixing Syria's war. His aim is to hold up Britain and America as paper tigers whose indecision has created a policy vacuum on Syria, into which Putin has confidently stepped. The Russian operation is small and portable enough for Putin to be able to roll it up in a week — and declare victory if and when the going gets tough. That, as he knows, is more than Britain and America have been able to do in any of our recent wars.



The Pope in peril

Where will Francis's Synod on the Family take the Church?

DAMIAN THOMPSON

Pope Francis's three-week Synod on the Family began on Sunday. Most of the 279 'Synod Fathers' are senior bishops, many of them cardinals. They have no authority to change any aspect of Catholic teaching or pastoral practice. They are discussing the 'hot button' issues of communion for the divorced and remarried and the spiritual care of gay Catholics — but, once the meeting is over, power will rest entirely in the hands of the Pope.

Conservative Catholics aren't happy. Last year, at a preparatory 'extraordinary' synod, officials hand-picked by Francis announced in the middle of the proceedings that the Fathers favoured a more relaxed approach to gay relationships and second marriages. Senior cardinals exploded with rage, because most Fathers favoured no such thing. The liberal synod organisers — Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary general of the synod, and Archbishop Bruno Forte, its 'special secretary' — were forced to drop their claims. The whole thing was a car crash and obviously their fault.

Yet Francis stuck by them. As a result, once again the synod working papers are stuffed with sociological waffle. Worse, Baldisseri and Forte are sitting on the commission that will draft the final report that goes to the Pope. This time round, however, the conservatives are alert to the dangers. On Monday morning they struck first.

Cardinal Péter Erdö is Primate of Hungary and a much-admired canon lawyer who received his red hat at the age of 51. He's still only 63. As 'general relator' of the 2014 and 2015 synods, it has been his job to deliver an opening address setting out their goals. Though emollient in manner, he is unquestionably a conservative — but, last year, his speech was full of liberal platitudes. What went wrong? The journalist Edward Pentin claims in his book *The Rigging of a Vatican Synod?* that Erdö had his arm twisted by Baldisseri, who forced him to rewrite his 2014 address to make it more Francis-friendly. 'Baldisseri wanted a lot of mercy, less truth,' says Pentin's source.

This week, by contrast, Erdö gave the opening address that conservatives were longing to hear. To quote the Vaticanologist John Allen, 'He seemed determined to close a series of doors that many people believed the last synod had left open — beginning

with the controversial proposal of German Cardinal Walter Kasper to allow divorced and civilly remarried Catholics to return to communion.' That ban, said, Erdö, was 'intrinsic' to the nature of marriage.

Kasper, an old foe of Benedict XVI whose career has been resurrected by Francis, did not join in the applause at the end of the speech. But it was interesting to see how many supposedly liberal cardinals clapped vigorously.

That was because it was a masterful speech. Erdö wove scripture, moral philosophy, canon law, the teachings of St John Paul II and anthropological theory — including a startling reference to internet pornography — into a subtle and humane defence of traditional doctrine. He also

Many Synod Fathers avoid factions to stay loyal to the Pope, yet they can't work out what he really thinks

quoted from the writings of Pope Francis, perhaps suppressing a wince at the clunky prose.

These are early days, but it looks as if the Pope has backed himself into a corner. Having put the Kasper plan on the table, he has found so little support for any version of it that he has allowed the general relator to trash it, albeit elegantly, in front of all the Synod Fathers.

One highly placed source thinks Francis was expecting a different sort of synod. 'He reckoned this was going to be another Vatican II, and it isn't,' he says.

If so, the Pope has only himself to blame. He has made sure that developing countries are heavily represented among the Synod Fathers. That's fair enough. But



Catholic bishops from Africa and Asia, while applauding Francis's tirades against 'economic imperialism', take a dim view of divorce and an even dimmer one of gays. Like Erdö, they want last year's doors slammed shut.

It's possible, too, that Pope Francis has overestimated the liberalism of practising Catholics in the West. Last year the bishops of England and Wales sent out a questionnaire to 'facilitate' reflections on the 2014 synod. The 'summary of responses' bears the fingerprints of lefty pressure groups — moaning about lack of funding for 'justice and peace' stunts and nostalgia for trendy liturgies. This may be the sort of thing Baldisseri and Forte want to read; but as a snapshot of parish life it is useless — and adds to the synod's air of inauthenticity.

There's also a lot of confusion. Many Synod Fathers are steering clear of factions because they want to stay loyal to the Pope. Yet they can't work out what he really thinks. They like him but don't know if they trust his judgment.

One decision really bothers them. Why did Francis ask Cardinal Godfried Danneels, a retired Belgian archbishop, to join the assembly? Danneels maintains that the church 'has never opposed the fact that there should exist a sort of "marriage" between homosexuals'. No other cardinal holds this batty view.

But that's not the problem. In 2010, a man confided in Danneels that he had been abused by a bishop, Roger Vangheluwe. The cardinal, who didn't know he was being tape-recorded, told him to shut up until after the bishop retired.

The victim was Bishop Vangheluwe's nephew. And now the cardinal who tried to cover up the abuse has been invited by the Pope to a synod on the family. Also, very unhelpfully, he has just written a book claiming credit for getting Bergoglio elected. 'The Danneels thing is the most troubling aspect of the synod,' says a respected Catholic writer. 'If the scandal breaks properly, it could blow the whole thing apart.'

Fortunately for Pope Francis, the media aren't interested in breaking his pontificate, which they realise is more fragile than it seems. Nor are most conservatives, who are mindful of his popularity in their home dioceses — and, despite everything, can't help warming to the old boy. But they look at his date of birth and think: whether he retires or dies, we're probably in the latter half of his reign.

The synod is their opportunity to identify a cardinal around whom they can unite, something they failed to do in the papal conclave of 2013 — preferably a younger man who can preserve the deposit of faith without coming across as a bigot, and certainly someone who, when he's excited, doesn't say the first thing that comes into his head. As of last Monday, all eyes are on Péter Erdö.

Cough it up for Labour



I have started salivating excessively at night. I wake each morning in a pillowed swamp of my own effluvium, a noisome pond which is — I suspect — redolent of rapidly approaching death. I have done the hypochondriac thing and googled the possible causes and there's a whole bunch of stuff — pancreatitis, close exposure to ionising radiation, rabies, pregnancy, serotonin disease and liver failure, to name but a few. My suspicion is it's either rabies or pregnancy because I exhibit other symptoms common to both conditions, according to the internet. I cannot abide drinking water, for example, which suggests that I might be hydrophobic, a key indicator of rabies. And when I see Fergal Keane, surrounded by Syrian 'refugees' — a putative brain surgeon here, a cheerful transgendered cripple there — emoting himself senseless on the *News at Ten*, I begin to froth at the mouth and yap furiously, incoherently enraged. That's rabies, isn't it?

On the other hand, I have put on a little weight recently, which is inexplicable unless I am with child, for my diet and exercise regimen has remained the same. It may well be that I am in the same position as those cretinous women, usually from places like 'Leeds', who present at their local surgery complaining of stomach pains, unaware that they are eight-and-a-half months pregnant as a consequence of some hurried act of sexual intercourse with a fairly close relative. Either way I am obviously very worried, and so is my wife, who has to change the pillow cases every evening.

There are always upsides, however. Always a silver lining. Think positive, as they continually tell you, encouragingly, in places such as hospices. The good news for me is that my hyper-salivation came in incredibly useful this week when I was up in Manchester to protest at the Tory scum attending their annual conference. Others, around me, had long since exhausted their reservoirs of phlegm, gobbling at the smirking, superannuated right-wing filth preparing to enslave us all in perpetual austerity while setting fire to tramps and stamping on the babies of impoverished single mothers.

But reader — let me tell you — thanks to rabies or pregnancy, I was like that Duracell bunny, the one that kept on drumming:

I expectorated longer and harder than even the most visceral entryist bearded Trots. Dry-mouthed by teatime, my comrades looked on in awe as I continued to shower Theresa May, Boris Johnson, George Osborne, Michael Gove et al with airborne lagoons of disease-occasioned spittle. For once I was respected, as a community activist and a political warrior, as swathed in my own rectitude as the loathsome Conservatives were eventually swathed in my copious emissions.

This performance of mine may be sufficient, by itself, to elevate me to branch secretary of my local Labour party, that gibbering cabal of perpetually enraged Corbynistas — because it is pretty much all the party has to

My comrades looked on in awe as I showered Theresa May, Boris Johnson and the rest with spittle

go on, now. Who has the most capacious vat of adolescent bile in their guts. Who can be the most petulant, irrational and offensive? Who can gob 50 metres or more in between screaming 'Stop the cuts!'? The rest of the country — that is, 99 per cent of the electorate — may have looked on, either askance or bemused or in utter disgust. But these quiescent dupes do not know the meaning of 'community justice' — a phrase used to describe spitting at or punching or maybe simply howling obscene abuse at people with whom we politically disagree, the presumption being that we have the support of 'ordinary people' for these actions.

Which of course we do, theoretically, if



'They wouldn't be where they are without their wealthy backers.'

not actually. They do not know that they support us, of course. But they do support us, dialectically, objectively, as a consequence of their estrangement from the means of production, no matter how comatose these idiots might be right now. We know about alienation and anomie, we know what it does to the souls of Ordinary Working-Class People. We are expending our phlegm, our precious bodily fluids, and our hatred precisely for them — the dozing multitudes who are objectively oppressed by Osborne's austerity and the City of London and the big multinational companies and the ghost of Margaret Thatcher and also Murdoch and the rest of the lying fascist press. We know all this, because we, fortunately enough, are enlightened — and sure, they don't, yet, quite get it. But one day they will, surely. Even supine imbeciles one day need to stand up.

Spitting in the face of Theresa May is a revolutionary act and one to be unequivocally commended. I would direct you to either our new leader Jeremy Corbyn or the intellectual colossus that is his shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, for evidence to support this thesis. Both believe in something called 'direct action' and that other charming thing 'community justice'. It is true that Mr Corbyn rather late in the day enjoined the rest of us not to make political protests personal because it somehow harmed the democratic process. But this was surely a sop to the establishment, given what the two men have previously said about how to fight the appalling Tories. On the streets, according to McDonnell, fight them on the streets. When you don't get your way via the bourgeois ballot box or as a consequence of entirely justifiable trade union action, take to the streets and burn stuff, wreck stuff, have a bit of a punch-up with the rozzers — and flob. Flob for Britain! Cough it all up and let it all out — the further the better.

My mysterious condition ensures that I can flob like a wizard, like a daemon. I am the Che Guevara of tobacco-inflected greenies. That is all what we, on the left, still have. Expectorant, by the gallon.

Let's talk about IVF

Pretty soon, one in ten British babies will begin life in a Petri dish.

So why is it still such a taboo subject?

POLLY MORGAN

As a result of a ruptured appendix, I am infertile. The appendicitis was followed by gangrene and peritonitis, which permanently blocked my fallopian tubes and left me having to do IVF for a chance to have my own child.

I have never felt shame about my situation but I have felt isolation and grief, both of which would be very much more bearable if people were prepared to talk openly about in-vitro fertilisation — to dispel the taboo that still surrounds it.

IVF in its various forms is incredibly common these days. More than 2.5 million babies born in the past seven years began their life in a Petri dish. For various reasons, some known, some unknown, overall birth rates in the West are falling rapidly and infertility is rising: pretty soon as many as one in every ten children born in this country will owe its life to fertility treatment.

You might reasonably think, then, that when I underwent my first (failed) IVF cycle, I'd have been surrounded by friends and acquaintances keen to give advice and share their experiences with me. The truth is that I struggled to find any, and when I raised the subject in public people either shifted uncomfortably — as though I had transgressed a social boundary — or reacted with fascination, wanting to know all the ins and outs.

Everyone I spoke to knew someone who had been through it, but no one would admit to having done IVF themselves. One couple I met at a dinner party knew intimate details of a 'friend's' treatment that they were only too willing to share. When I later discovered this same couple had non-identical twins, their expertise suddenly made sense. They did subsequently own up but I was disheartened that they'd been so coy at first.

To a certain extent, I understand all this reluctance to talk about IVF. Back in the 1980s when the first 'test-tube babies' were being born, patients were under pressure to keep their treatment secret. The receptionist at the pioneering Bourn Hall Clinic, Vivien Collins, has spoken of women expressing disgust that she worked in a 'test centre where they made babies'. And that horrified reaction, the idea that IVF involves some sinister process, still lingers today.

Last spring the designers Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana branded IVF children 'synthetic', which provoked a public spat with Elton John. For most people of my parents' generation, IVF is an unknown and therefore alarming.

The other reason for keeping schtum is superstition. Couples feel that if they talk about their hopes, they may not come true. And even if all goes well, having a IVF friend can be hard. It might seem sensible to buddy up with another patient in the clinic, to share the ups and downs, the trials of nightly injections and invasive scans — but statistically

If we talked about it more, we'd all know that fertility treatment isn't the preserve of the spoiled, rich or vain

only one woman in three will end up with a baby at the end of the agonising process. How do you commiserate with your pal or continue a friendship when you're no longer in the same boat? So women in fertility-clinic waiting rooms traditionally stare down at their iPads and stalk fertility forums looking for advice, rather than turn to those beside them.

A warning to anyone thinking of IVF: there's something both glutinous and ghoulish about those fertility forums. It's

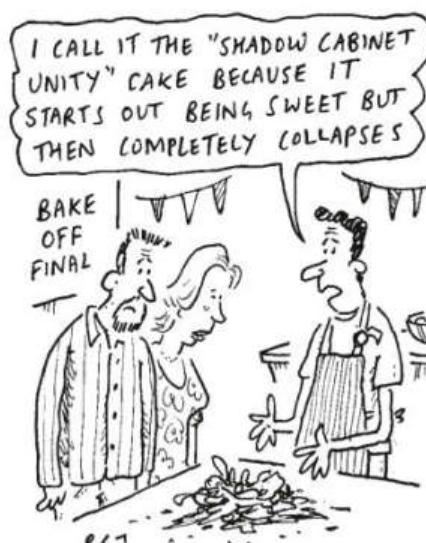
a euphemistic world where the language of relationships is infantilised and creepy acronyms are universally adopted. There are no boyfriends or husbands, only 'DH' (dear husband) for even the most useless man. Rather than being wished luck, you are 'sent babydust' and women's tales of miscarriage are peppered with tragicomic flying-baby emoticons. You must navigate your way through the BFNs and the BFPs (that's big fat negative and big fat positive) and my personal favourite BD (baby dance — yes, that's sexual intercourse) to try to make sense of your experience.

The forums make me wish all the more that we could, as a society, talk openly and sensibly about infertility. The women online are clearly tough: they've endured numerous, arduous treatment cycles, not to mention miscarriages. Yet online they communicate in the written equivalent of baby voices. We do everyone a disservice by being coy.

If we talked about it more, we'd all know that fertility treatment isn't the preserve of the spoiled, rich or vain — it's available on the NHS and rightly so. With fewer people able to buy a home in their twenties, more women working and life expectancy increasing, it's only going to get more common for women to have children later in life. And as mothers get older and treatment more effective and cheaper, the ratio of assisted to natural births is only going to narrow. We should be teaching our daughters not just how to avoid getting pregnant, but what to do if they can't conceive. It would help women plan their families better if girls knew from the start about all the difficulties of a late-in-life pregnancy.

Because of the stigma still hovering over IVF, the science is moving faster than public awareness, and this is dangerous as well as unnecessary. Many IVF clinics are now offering both ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection, which means the doctors can select a healthy-looking sperm) and genetic screening. But we just don't know how safe either of these procedures are, or whether they're more likely to lead to babies with birth defects. The frontier children are only just reaching adulthood and studies into potential health risks remain inconclusive. If the public were informed and interested, they'd be pushing for the NHS to fund rigorous studies and hold unscrupulous clinics to account.

There should be no shame at all in having an IVF baby, or in undergoing IVF. The children born of IVF are meticulously planned for and warmly welcomed, more so than any 'Oops, the condom split' baby. If I'm ever lucky enough to have a child, and to find myself in receipt of those awkward questions about reproduction that every mother is asked, I'm going to tell my child the truth about how they came to be, because they should be proud.



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Isis takes its British girls seriously. Why don't we?



When the first schoolgirls ran away to Isis I had some sympathy for them — at least, I could see how they'd been suckered in. The girls were young, daft, desperate for a cause. They'd nosed about online, and found the Twitter feeds of jihadi wives who sell Syria as a teenage paradise: all fast food, deathless love, martyrdom and shopping.

Because I felt for those first schoolgirls, I kept following their progress, checking for them online as they set up in Syria, married, and began to tweet themselves. But as I followed them on social media, my sympathy soon turned to disgust.

'Happy #9/11' wrote young Zahra Halane, one of the twins from Manchester who fled to Isis last year. 'Happiest day of my life. Hopefully more to come. InSha Allah #Is.'

Her sister Salma cheered on the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre: 'May Allah protect all the mujahideen in Franceeee!!! Shooting was maaaad!!'

Um Ayoub, 16, also from England, listed a few of her favourite things: 'Vans, Nike, Chelsea FC, beheading Kafirs.'

It's strange to feel one's own heart harden; odd to notice that, without willing it, one's thoughts have changed. All this dancing on the kafir's grave had the same effect on me as I expect it had on others. The girls who once seemed victims became aggressors. They want to kill *all* unbelievers? Their former school pals? Me? Well, let them go to Syria, then. Let them stay there. Why waste money saving kids who want us dead?

It's a satisfying position, and one I was enjoying right up until last week, when I read a report written by a think tank, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part', it was called, and it showed me what a terrible dunce I'd been. We must take these girls seriously, said the ISD, and we must stop them leaving — or else we'll be making a historic, catastrophic mistake.

ISD say our girls are being lured not to Syria but to Libya now. A new cry has gone up on Twitter; the beckoning of British-born brides of Isis to their little sisters back home: 'Come to Libya. Hijra is not only to Shaam [Syria]. Libya needs you too.' 'Life in Libya is mind bogglingly great.' 'Make your Visa and go to #IS in Libya. We need to raise more

awareness.' And all over London, daughters who seemed safe in their bedrooms start typing secretly: where should I fly to? How do I find you?

Isis have held territory in Libya for a while now, thanks to Mr Cameron and his idiot war. They run training camps on the coast near the Tunisian border (Jihadi John was a graduate) and have just retaken Sirte, Gaddafi's old home town. But as ISD say, this sudden call for girls changes the game. Girls mean brides and brides mean babies, brainwashed from birth. Girls mean Isis are ready to secure another state, a new caliphate — and in terms

There's a shift in the thinking of jihadi wives, an impatience to get to the hacking and torturing themselves

of our security, if not human misery, Libya as a caliphate makes Syria look benign.

Libya is the dream for Isis, the real promised land. There's oil to be sold and untold zillions to be extorted from migrants hoping to cross the Med, but more importantly, it's the perfect launch pad for attacks on Europe. One Isis supporter, quoted by the *Telegraph*'s Ruth Sherlock, put it like this: 'Libya has a long coast and looks upon the southern crusader states which can be reached with ease by even a rudimentary boat.'

And here's where our schoolgirls might really make their mark. They'll get in those rudimentary boats with the refugees, and with their children perhaps for added innocence. They'll be rescued, make contact with comrades on the ground, then pick their moment to detonate off to paradise, taking the kafir with them. This is Isis's plan, openly discussed

online, to take terror to infidel Europe. The stowaway schoolgirl jihadis of today are tomorrow's homing missiles.

But don't Isis say a woman's place is in the home? Aren't Isis wives condemned to a life of cookery and beating up their Kurdish slaves? For the moment, yes. There is no lethal brigade of Isis lady assassins, much though the red-tops wish it so. But worshiping violence creates an appetite among the faithful. Beheadings are moreish, as England once knew well, and the longer a girl's in the caliphate, the more bloodthirsty she's likely to become. ISD have spotted, they say, a shift in the thinking of jihadi wives, an impatience among women to get to the hacking and torturing themselves. Umm Ubaydah, a western woman in her early twenties who acts as mentor to youngsters overseas, tweeted hopefully: 'Maybe the time for us to participate is soon?'

Just think, say the ISD, of Chechnya's female fighters, who first played just a sedate and supportive role in the Russo-Chechen wars. During the second war, after their husbands' 'martyrdom', these homebodies became the 'black widow' suicide bombers.

And don't imagine Isis don't see the potential in their girls. In return for the release of the Japanese hostage Kenji Goto, they demanded 'sister' Sajida Mubarak al-Rishawi, a failed suicide bomber held in Amman. It wasn't that they wanted her particularly, but demanding a sister sent a message to the rest worldwide: we value you — and especially if you're prepared for martyrdom.

Each lonely schoolgirl, curious, religious, hormonal, is a godsend to Isis. That's why they devote so many thousands of hours to converting them, to talking theology on the internet and making friends.

So the mystery of it all turns out to be not why the girls go so much as why we, Britain, do so little about it. No one in government is much concerned, says the ISD, no one thinks runaway teens a big deal. Our spooks and wonks have other concerns, which is why the ISD wrote their report. There's some talk of educational videos and of learning from the campaigns that stopped kids smoking, but what's really needed are mentors of our own, legions of them, to counteract Isis's recruiters. We need to take these girls as seriously as Isis takes them or we really will live to regret it.



The death of Diesel

The Volkswagen scandal has brought into question the future of the diesel engine. A century ago its inventor, Rudolf Diesel, was himself the subject of scandal. On 29 September 1913 he disappeared from the steamship *Dresden* on its way from Antwerp to Harwich. He had retired to his cabin after dinner but had not changed into his bedclothes. His body was found off Norway ten days later. He was apparently on his way to discuss selling diesel engines to the Royal Navy for submarines, leading to suspicions that he had been murdered to prevent the technology falling into British hands. His financial situation, however, pointed to possible suicide. The Royal Navy went into the first world war with steam-powered submarines.

How the regions rate

George Osborne will let councils keep income from business rates. Total rateable value of business properties by region:

London	£16bn
South-east	£9bn
North-west	£6bn
East	£5.3bn
West Midlands	£4.8bn
Yorks and Humberside	£4.8bn
South-west	£4.3bn
East Midlands	£3.6bn
Wales	£2.4bn
North-east	£1.7bn

Source: IFS

Line of duty

A police officer was killed by a stolen vehicle in Liverpool. Is it becoming more dangerous to be a police officer?

OFFICERS KILLED IN VIOLENT ACTS OR IN PURSUIT OF CRIMINALS IN BRITAIN	
1900s	25
1920s	12
1940s	17
1960s	22
1980s	50
2000s	20
2010s (so far)	6

Student politics

How do students vote? Most popular party at various universities:

Conservative Bath, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Durham, Exeter, Imperial College London, LSE, Loughborough, Newcastle, Nottingham, Reading, Southampton, St Andrews

Labour Cambridge, Lancaster, Liverpool, King's College London, University College London, Manchester, Oxford, Sheffield

Green Edinburgh

SNP Glasgow, Strathclyde

Source: highfliers.co.uk

The Republicans' boss lady

Is Carly Fiorina the woman to see off Donald Trump – and Hillary Clinton?

PHILIP DELVES BROUGHTON

The Republican party is showing all the attention span of a hyperactive toddler this primary season, moving from one shiny toy to the next. Donald Trump still dominates the nursery, like some giant plastic fire engine. But the pieces are starting to look careworn and the battery is going on the siren. The former neurosurgeon Ben Carson, now tied with Trump in some polls, is the teddy bear dragged around the playground a few times and now slumped in a corner. Fresh out of the box though is Carly Fiorina, the former chief executive of Hewlett Packard, gleaming amidst the gaggle of tired rivals.

At the most recent Republican debate, Fiorina wore what seemed from podium height upwards to be an electric-blue wet-suit. She was the only candidate who didn't look like she'd been living in hotels and breakfasting on doughnuts for three months. She shot down Donald Trump for questioning whether anyone could vote for 'that face' and the audience went wild. She is a conservative dynamo plucked from Cecil Parkin-

*Only the blood of eagles
can sate her
righteous anger*

son's most fevered imaginings. And a friend of Benjamin Netanyahu to boot. When she was in corporate technology sales, she once turned up to a meeting with socks stuffed down her underwear to show the men she had what it took to close a deal. She tells the story proudly in her memoirs. For rich, hot-blooded Republicans, how much better can you get?

But Fiorina might not be so attractive to middle America. She speaks with the brusque confidence of the corporate CEO, often starting sentences with the phrase, 'I am angered by...' She is angered by a lot: hypocrisy, the tax code, environmentalists and liberals, especially liberals. She says brutal things with a tilt of the head and a bright, white smile, the kind that evil executives put on when they are firing everyone, moving jobs to China and then leaving with a giant golden parachute.

For a lapsed Episcopalian who rarely goes to church, Fiorina is unusually angry about abortion. In the most recent candidates' debate, she challenged the absent Hillary



Clinton and Barack Obama to watch a video about government-funded abortion clinics gathering foetal tissue for medical research: 'Watch a fully formed foetus on the table, its heart beating, its legs kicking, while someone says, "We have to keep it alive to harvest its brain."' It's the kind of gory stuff you hear on the anti-abortion, religious fringes, but not often in the mainstream.

She's just as angry with anyone who fusses about climate change. She makes the usual conservative arguments that jobs matter more than the fate of animals, that the science on climate change is questionable and that there's no point America putting its economy through the environmental wringer while China does nothing. But just when you're thinking, ho-hum, another country-club Republican clinking the Scotch glass and grousing about tree-huggers, her anger takes her off piste. Wind turbines are an exciting technology, she said in a recent interview, but people need to know the truth: 'Do we tell people the truth that it slaughters millions of birds every year? I mean, eagles, falcons, birds people that care about. Do we tell people that it's slaughtering these birds?'

The greatest bird-slayer in America isn't wind turbines. It's windows. Followed by cats, high-tension wires, pesticides and then cars. Windmills aren't butchering America's birds of prey, spraying blood and feathers across the sky. Most of the birds who fly into them

are 'small passernes', perching birds or songbirds. But the gore-crazed Fiorina wants us to think of environmental issues in the same way she wants us to think about reproductive rights, in the grisliest terms conceivable. Only the blood of eagles can sate her righteous anger.

But perhaps you have to use extreme language to get any attention in this primary circus. It works for Donald Trump, and Fiorina may be smart to use controversy to win media airtime. She also tells a mean personal story. Born to a solid middle-class family, started work as a secretary, rose to be head of the largest technology company in the world, survived breast cancer, buried a child. Tough. Resilient. Only in America.

Some of it is even true. Her father was an eminent judge who taught at Stanford Law School and served as deputy attorney general under President Nixon. She went to Stanford as an undergraduate, studied ancient Greek to read Aristotle and received a degree in medieval history and philosophy, which she jokes made her unemployable. She worked as a secretary in her university holidays and for six months in her early twenties. She then obtained an MBA and, at the age of 25, joined AT&T as a management trainee. Nineteen years later she was appointed chief executive of Hewlett-Packard, making



her the most prominent woman in corporate America.

During her five-year stint at HP, she doubled the size of the company by acquiring a rival computer maker, Compaq, and was paid more than \$100 million for her work. She managed through the collapse of the dotcom bubble, and HP emerged from the carnage in tolerable shape. But even today people still can't agree whether she was any good. She was certainly ambitious, aggressive and brutal to anyone who opposed her. She was reported to have hung a painting of herself in the corporate headquarters, and issued noisemakers at corporate events to greet her when she arrived on stage. Her board fired her in 2005, citing problems with execution and a share price that had fallen 60 per cent under her tenure. She has not taken another job in business since.

In 2009 Fiorina was diagnosed with breast cancer; she underwent a double mastectomy,

chemotherapy and radiation and has since recovered. That same year her 35-year-old stepdaughter, Lori Ann, died. Fiorina married her second husband, Frank, when she was 31. Frank had two daughters by his first marriage, who were ten and 14 at the time. The girls were placed in the custody of their mother, Frank's ex-wife. As an adult, Lori Ann suffered from bulimia and became addicted to prescription drugs. She married, divorced and died having distanced herself from her father and stepmother. This was the child Fiorina tells her audiences she buried.

She derives emotional texture from this story, but she has never said enough about her relationship with her stepdaughter for her audience to empathise at more than the most superficial level. Lori Ann's mother has said that Fiorina's version of events is incomplete. This sounds like emotional dynamite which could still blow up in Fiorina's face.

Many Republicans are now fantasising about unleashing Fiorina on Hillary Clinton. The only thing better than beating Hillary would be to gazump her bid to become America's first woman president with one of their own. But Fiorina's anger and attitude so far seem like the socks bulging through her underwear. Diverting and provocative, but not the real thing.

Niall Ferguson names the next president, p. 26.

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My word!

I invented the term 'virtue signalling' in *The Spectator*. Now it seems to be taking over the world

JAMES BARTHOLOMEW

To my astonishment and delight, the phrase 'virtue signalling' has become part of the English language. I coined the phrase in an article here in *The Spectator* (18 April) in which I described the way in which many people say or write things to indicate that they are virtuous. Sometimes it is quite subtle. By saying that they hate the *Daily Mail* or Ukip, they are really telling you that they are admirably non-racist, left-wing or open-minded. One of the crucial aspects of virtue signalling is that it does not require actually doing anything virtuous. It does not involve delivering lunches to elderly neighbours or staying together with a spouse for the sake of the children. It takes no effort or sacrifice at all.

Since April, I have watched with pleasure and then incredulity how the phrase has leapt from appearing in a single article into the everyday language of political discourse. One of the first journalists to pick up on the phrase was Liz Jones in the *Mail on Sunday* on 3 May. Not long after, Libby Purves used it in the *Times* (11 May). Janan Ganesh in the *Financial Times* (20 July) wrote about Labour party leaders for whom 'Europeanism is just a virtue-signalling gesture like wearing a charity ribbon'. Two days later, Helen Lewis used it in the *New Statesman*, saying 'a lot of what happens on Facebook, as with Twitter, is "virtue signalling" — showing off how right on you are'.

This month, use of the phrase has gone through the roof, appearing in newspapers almost on a daily basis. It has been deployed by Nick Cohen in a *Spectator* blog, Antonia Hoyle in *Stella* magazine, James Delingpole on Breitbart, Catriona Stewart in the *Glasgow Herald*, Memphis Barker in the *Independent* and Allister Heath in the *Daily Telegraph*.

Nicky Campbell, the best-known presenter on Radio 5 Live, tweeted to his 102,000 followers (13 September), 'There is much virtue signalling going on at the moment.' A search on the *Guardian* website reveals that contributors there have used it 241 times. Good grief, it has even appeared in West Ham Online.

The migration crisis gave the concept a boost. One person on Twitter wrote, 'There must be a special level in hell below rapists and killers for anyone that uses twitter & a migrant crisis to #virtuesignal.'

I bumped into Dominic Lawson, former editor of *The Spectator*, who remarked that my life is now complete: I have added to the English language and can retire from the scene, perfectly satisfied. I have reluctantly given up hopes of ever appearing on *Desert Island Discs* — a pity considering I have been preparing for it for some 35 years — but at least I can comfort myself that I have coined a phrase. I thus join, admittedly at a low level, the ranks of word-creators such as William Shakespeare ('uncomfortable' and

'Virtue signalling' fulfils a need. People have seen the phenomenon for years without having a phrase for it

'assassination' and many others) and Thomas Carlyle ('dry as dust' and, most famously, 'environment').

I guess the reason that 'virtue signalling' has been used so much is that it fulfils a need. For years, people have noticed the phenomenon but did not have a word or phrase to describe it. One person tweeted, 'Love it when you find out something that's irritated you for years has a name #virtuesignalling.' The lack of a phrase obstructed open discussion of what was going on. Newspeak, the fictional language created by George Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, limited the number of words people used with the intention of restricting the ability of peo-

ple to express themselves and even to think. New phrases and words are the opposite of Newspeak. They make expression and argument easier.

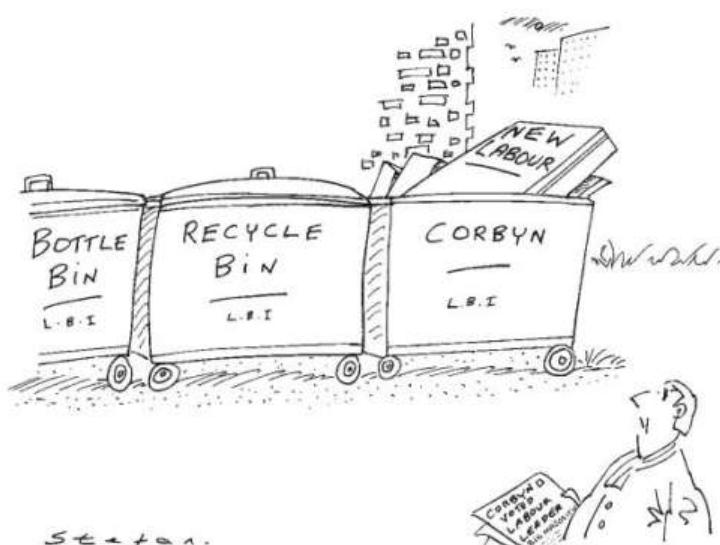
It is slightly frustrating that some people have credited Libby Purves with creating the phrase. Unlike Liz Jones, she did not mention where it came from. But I forgive her. I am a fan of hers and the way she presents *Midweek* on Radio 4. We were contemporaries at Oxford and I'll never forget seeing her walking in front of me wearing hot pants. That sort of thing creates a special bond.

It has been a pleasure to see the phrase used in all sorts of contexts from environmental policy to dating. One person on Twitter claimed people were using virtue signalling 'to get laid'. Another wrote, 'If you find yourself using corn chips to signal your virtue, you're trying too hard.'

The phrase came to me after years of trying to come up with the something. Researching my previous book, *The Welfare State We're In*, I came to realise that the Victorians and Edwardians gave vastly more money to charity than people do now. It was normal even for the working and artisan classes to give as much as 10 per cent of their income. That compares with donations of less than 1 per cent for the general population now. Among many other things, they gave money to help charitable hospitals through the King's Fund in Saturday workplace collections. They also took it as normal to look after their aged parents and other relatives.

I compared them with people I met who thought they were virtuous merely because they voted Labour once every five years and expressed hatred of right-wingers. That is not virtue. That is lazy, self-righteous and silly.

James Bartholomew is the author, most recently, of The Welfare of Nations.





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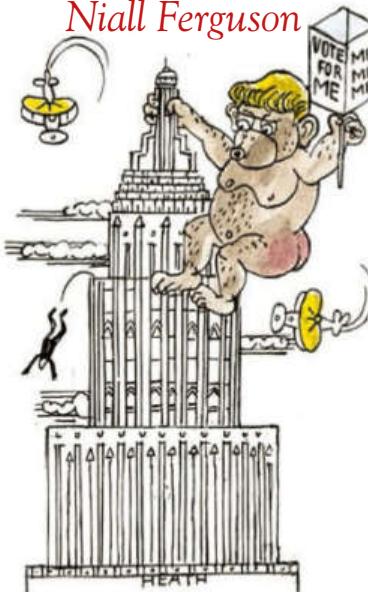
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AMERICAN NOTEBOOK

Niall Ferguson



I have a sinking feeling that Joe Biden might be the next president of the United States. In a brilliant essay published by the *American Spectator* in 2010, Angelo Codevilla of Boston University foresaw a popular revolt against 'America's ruling class'. What he calls 'the Country party' repudiates the co-option of the mainstream Republican party by the bureaucratic behemoth that is Washington, DC. You cannot understand the popularity of Donald Trump until you grasp the essential characteristics of this Country party. White, male, ageing Americans are sick of political correctness. They are sick of carefully calibrated talking points. They are sick of immigrants. They are sick of wars in faraway places of which they know nothing and care less. And they are sick of government programmes — even ones they collect money from. In all his crassness, Trump speaks for these people. The more he says the unsayable — 'Build a wall [along the border with Mexico]!', 'Send back the Syrians!' — the more the ruling class shudders. And the more the ruling class shudders, the better he does. As I write, the latest polls for the Republican primaries in Iowa and New Hampshire have him in front. In the former, he is on 24 per cent. Jeb Bush, the ruling class's candidate, is on 7 per cent.

Yet there will surely come a time when Trump will overplay his hand — or perhaps the costs of campaigning will start to exceed the benefits to his brand. When that moment comes, white, male, ageing Americans will need a new champion. Of course, a professional politician like the Vice President is as much a member of the ruling class as it is possible to be. But never underestimate the appeal of crassness at a time like this. Biden is routinely described as a blowhard and a loudmouth. To the Country party, that's alluring. The latest NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll says Biden would fare significantly better than Clinton in a contest with any leading Republican contender, including Trump, whom he would trounce 56 to 35 per cent.

Henry Kissinger, whose life I am halfway through chronicling, was never much good at American domestic

politics (his friend William F. Buckley referred to his 'dogged ignorance' of the subject). Grand strategy was Kissinger's thing. But by the time of the 1968 election, he had learned the lesson that 'the typical political leader of the contemporary managerial society is a man with a strong will, a high capacity to get himself elected, but no very great conception of what he is going to do when he gets into office'. Biden fits this bill. He understands, for example, the enduring appeal of the reluctant candidate, who only enters the race when his party and his country insist that he do so — hence his public agonising about whether to run. He understands, too, that a Democratic victory will depend on keeping together President Obama's anti-Country coalition of groups who still see Washington as their friend: women, the young and minorities (call them the 'Supreme Court party') — hence his

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Bulgarian tragedy

From 'Bulgaria and Greece', *The Spectator*, 9 October 1915: The fact that the British people will in all probability soon be at war with Bulgaria is a matter of very deep regret, for this nation has always watched the development of the peasant state with strong sympathy... But though we can and do sympathise with the Bulgarian people, it will be quite impossible to prevent the consequences of their king's evil deeds from falling upon them. War is a stern business, and the allies cannot alter their course of action even though they understand Bulgaria's difficulties. Regret it as we may, the Bulgarian people will have to reap the harvest they have sown, or allowed to be sown.

much-publicised August meeting with Senator Elizabeth Warren, the darling of the left. Note, too, that Biden would be the candidate most likely to inherit the formidable, data-driven electoral machine that won two successive Obama victories.

On Tuesday I launched *Kissinger*, volume one, at the Four Seasons — still the powerbrokers' number-one restaurant in Manhattan — courtesy of my favourite international man of mystery, Nicolas Berggruen. Former mayor Mike Bloomberg swung by, triggering a wave of acclaim and flash photography. A Bloomberg run for the White House remains Upper East Side's dream. It isn't going to happen, alas. 'You can't win,' is how he succinctly puts it. One of many handicaps is that Bloomberg knows exactly what he would do if he ever got to the White House. He is a bit too Lee Kuan Yew for the rest of America. That ban on supersize sodas has not been forgotten by the Country party.

It's different in South America, where I spent the weekend. Argentina's presidential election is just days away and the ruling class — the Peronists, who have dominated since the era of Juan and Eva Perón — are nervous. Peronism's signature combination is unaffordably generous welfare and (consequently) regular financial crises. Periodically, Argentine voters weary of the latter and today, after 12 years under another Peronist husband-and-wife team, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, change is in the air. Admittedly, two of the three leading candidates are Peronists. But the third, Mauricio Macri, is the Mike Bloomberg of Buenos Aires. A successful businessman who has been mayor of the city since 2007, Macri might just win if he can force a second round that would pit him one-on-one against the Peronist Daniel Scioli. If, meanwhile, Hillary Clinton goes on to win the US presidency, Argentines can say that Peronism has moved north. Her path to power would essentially be the same as the one taken by both Eva Perón and Cristina Kirchner.

The first volume of Niall Ferguson's new biography of Henry Kissinger is published by Penguin.

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The stupid, scary plan to outlaw climate change



How do you make an imaginary problem so painfully real that everyone suffers? It's an odd question to ask, you might think, but it's one that has been exercising some of the brightest minds in the legal firmament, led by no less a figure than Lord Justice Carnwath of the Supreme Court.

Last month, at an event whose sinister significance might have passed unnoticed had it not been for the digging of Canadian investigative blogger Donna Laframboise, Carnwath contrived to nudge the world a step closer towards enacting potentially the most intrusive, economically damaging and vexatious legislation in history: an effective global ban on so-called 'climate change'.

The setting was a rather dull-sounding symposium Carnwath organised at King's College London called 'Adjudicating the Future: Climate Change and the Rule of Law'. We don't know the names of the 'leading judges, lawyers and legal academics' from 11 nations who attended because the organisers won't disclose them. What we do know, though, is that you and I helped pay for this three-day shindig: among the sponsors were the Supreme Court, Her Majesty's government and (publicly funded) King's College London.

So far, so very dreary. It probably wouldn't have got into the news at all if the Prince of Wales (Carnwath used to be his attorney general) hadn't published a letter of support, urging the judiciary to play a 'crucial role' in preventing 'the disastrous consequences of global warming'. But as ever at these grey convocations where men we've never heard of decide our future behind closed doors, the devil lies all in the detail.

We can see this in the opening speeches, viewable online and described by Laframboise as 'among the most terrifying 90 minutes I've ever witnessed'. If you've the stomach to sit through the faux-judicious burblings, you'll see what she means: here are leading, influential, international lawyers proposing to reject the scientific method, bypass democracy and permanently shut down the climate debate by declaring 'global warming' illegal under international law.

It sounds absurd. Impossible even. But already there is local precedent. This summer,

in response to a case brought by a green activist group called the Urgenda Foundation, a Dutch court ruled that the Netherlands government must drastically reduce its greenhouse gas emissions in order to save future generations from the effects of dangerous climate change. Central to the court's decision — and widely quoted in its ruling — was the allegedly accepted scientific wisdom that the world simply cannot be allowed to heat up by more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels without disastrous consequences.

Had that court done its homework, it would have discovered that the 2°C figure was the arbitrary invention, at the height of

It would be great news for lawyers, and an endless excuse for litigation by the likes of Greenpeace

the climate scare in the 1990s when the world still was actually warming, of a neo-Malthusian activist-scientist called Hans Joachim Schellnhuber (who also advised the Pope on his recent, controversial encyclical on the environment). Schellnhuber has himself admitted: 'Two degrees is not a magical limit. It's clearly a political goal. The world will not come to an end right away in the event of stronger warming, nor are we definitely saved if warming is not as significant. The reality, of course, is much more complicated.'

Indeed it is. There is evidence to suggest that even were the planet to heat up to 2.5°C above pre-industrial levels, the benefits — for example in increased crop yields — would

outweigh the drawbacks. But no one really knows because global climate is a chaotic system which remains ill-understood even by the 'experts'. Only a fortnight ago, a new study was published revealing that the oceans are producing, abiotically, unexpectedly vast quantities of isoprene, a volatile organic compound known for cooling properties. No wonder then, that with discoveries like this being made all the time, the alarmists' doomsday computer models are continually failing to accord with reality: there's still so much stuff out there that the scientists don't know.

Which, of course, is precisely what is scary about this scheme being cooked up by Carnwath and his green fellow travellers in the judiciary. What they are proposing is to ignore the uncertainty, act as if the 'science' really is 'settled' and close the argument forever, using the sledgehammer instrument of the International Court of Justice.

This was the shameless proposal of Carnwath's keynote speaker, Philippe Sands QC. By making the '2°C target' an 'obligation under international law', he suggested, the UN's General Assembly could impose 'obligations to reduce emissions, including if necessary by phasing out altogether certain emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases'.

Since carbon dioxide is a natural byproduct of almost every industrial process, you can perhaps imagine the chaos such legislation would cause. It would be great news for lawyers like Sands, of course, and an endless excuse for litigation by the likes of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. But for businesses and nation states on the receiving end, it would be a disaster.

Meanwhile, in the real world, for no reason that any alarmist scientist has ever managed plausibly to explain, there has been no actual 'global warming' for nigh on 19 years. This point ought not to need reiterating. The only reason it has to be — with *Groundhog Day* regularity, unfortunately — is in order to counter the specious propaganda of an overmighty green establishment embracing everything from the Obama administration and the Vatican to the BBC and, now, it seems, certain members of our famously neutral and apolitical senior judiciary.



AIR CON



Air quality around Heathrow currently breaches EU law. And yet the Airports Commission Report suggests that, after a third runway is built, it will be within legal limits. So millions more car journeys to the airport are going to mean less pollution. Really?

Air quality at Gatwick has never breached EU limits and we still won't even with a second runway. So best to get on with it, choose the option that can actually be built and make sure Britain gets the benefits. Obviously.

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Spanish practices

Sir: In your leading article last week you wrote: 'Yes, Catalonia and Scotland were independent in the 16th century.' True about Scotland, but not Catalonia. Since 1162, the Kingdom of Aragón and the county of Barcelona have been a single entity and, since 1475, the Catholic kings and their descendants have ruled both Castile and Aragón. The Spanish 16th century was essentially ruled by the King Emperor Charles I of Spain and his son Philip II, although Spanish kings would appoint viceroys in all the territories of the Kingdom of Aragón. To legitimise their claims, Catalan nationalists often compare their situation with that of Quebec or Scotland. But such a strategy will only succeed with the unwary.

*Eduardo Barrachina
London N1*

Sir: I agree with you on the limited strategic and social skills of the Spanish prime minister in the management of domestic policy in general, and particularly with regards to Catalonia (Leading article, 3 October). But Catalonia is not Scotland — it was never a sovereign state with its own monarchy and parliament. It is also important to mention that in the most recent regional elections, the separatists obtained 62 seats against the 71 seats that they managed in 2012, meaning they have lost almost 15 per cent of their seats. And their proposed referendum challenges a fundamental principle. To comply with and enforce the law is one of the core functions of any government. Those laws can be modified through democratically established procedures, and respecting the right to vote of all Spaniards is essential.

*Ines Rivera
London NW3*

Prickly problem

Sir: I agree with Simon Barnes (3 October) that we should encourage the hedgehog population, but it is not as simple as making some holes in the fence and leaving a few rotten logs around. When I rang a hedgehog hospital to see if I could give a couple of its patients a home, the first thing they asked was whether we had badgers in our area. Badgers flip hedgehogs on to their backs and munch through their soft bellies. We have a large garden with superb hedgehog cover and wild sections but as hedgehogs roam over a couple of miles they would almost certainly get eaten, and the hospital said 'no'. Since badgers are nocturnal, most people don't realise how

large their population has grown. These days, you're much more likely to find a squashed badger on the side of the road than a squashed hedgehog.

*Marie East
Hunts Green, Newbury*

Wilder assertion

Sir: Lloyd Evans (Arts, 3 October) quotes the great Billy Wilder as saying: 'In comedy every minute over 90 counts against you.' Why then do Wilder's two masterpieces *The Apartment* and *Some Like It Hot* run at 125 and 120 minutes respectively? And why does *Irma La Douce* run at 147?

*David Hare
London NW3*

Agriculture and Sir Keith

Sir: Regarding Charles Moore's response to my letter (Notes, 3 October) on my encounter with Sir Keith Joseph, Mr Moore has still not explained why, in support of his case he stated that, 'I cannot find that he [Sir Keith] had any position with Nottingham University' when he knew that the interview, at which Sir Keith

was present in 1964, did not take place at Nottingham University. I have no intention of questioning the evidence of Mr Moore's friend who stated that, in terms of agriculture, Sir Keith 'knew nothing about it'. However, *inter alia*, I was informed by a friend that Sir Keith had an interest in the third world and industrial policy groups which included agricultural matters and that he was involved with the Farmers' Union of Wales in 1976, the year the wider Race Relations Act was passed. Finally, as I stated before, no apology from Mr Moore is necessary. However, permit me to remind him respectfully that, in our society, it is not uncommon to find people presiding over matters of which they do not know.

*Professor Sir Geoff Palmer
Penicuik, Scotland*

At home in the 1950s

Sir: I want to reassure Melissa Kite that her ideal village exists (Real life, 26 September). In fact, she needs to talk to her colleague Martin Vander Weyer, because North Yorkshire has lots of villages of the kind she is looking for. Yes, it's a long way from London, but we have good broadband and plenty of people work from home. After years as an expatriate living in the Far East, I moved here 11 years ago and I love it. Although we are losing village shops, if you live close to a market town, you don't have to go far for your shopping and you always bump into people you know. There is a surprising mixture of backgrounds, jobs and interesting discussions — and we all know where meat comes from. It is always 1956 here.

*Susie Taylor
Old Malton, North Yorkshire*

Prom dates

Sir: I have had the good fortune to attend the Last Night of the Proms twice, once in the 1960s (Sir Malcolm Sargent) and again in the 1990s (Sir Andrew Davis). This occasion, as everyone knows, is uniquely British, but in recent years the BBC has chosen to dilute the national character of the music and, for the third consecutive year, opted for a foreign conductor. That was what I, not unreasonably, objected to (Letters, 3 October).

*The Revd Anthony Pellegrini
Harrow, Middlesex*

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Osborne's solution to the business rates scandal: what's the political angle?



This column has repeatedly cried that something must be done about business rates. Yes, it's fair to ask businesses, as well as individual citizens, to contribute to local public-sector provision — even though businesses can't vote. But it was far from fair during the recession to go on collecting £26 billion a year from hard-pressed firms based on an arbitrary multiplier applied to out-of-date rental valuations, in many cases long after those values had slumped to the point at which the rates were a higher cost than the rents.

The same firms were being charged all over again for basic services such as refuse disposal, and complaints that the system was poisoning small-business growth and town-centre regeneration were greeted by ministers only with issue-ducking deferrals of overdue revaluations. When I argued two years ago that 'an across-the-board cut in the business-rates multiplier would swiftly pay for itself — and more — through new jobs, better profits and the taxes they generate', no one seemed to be listening.

Well, now Osborne has done something at last; and as so often with this Chancellor, we are left to work out what its effect will be, and what is his political calculation. Henceforth, local authorities will keep the £26 billion (rather than remitting half of it to the Treasury) and will be able to cut business rates if they think that will attract new business investment and thereby increase total local revenues; authorities with elected mayors will also be able to increase rates, by a small margin, so long as the takings are spent on infrastructure improvements.

Those who believe Osborne's 'northern powerhouse' is a political sham immediately howl that the new system will exacerbate the 'north-south divide' by sucking economic activity towards south-eastern authorities that can most easily afford to cut rates. Others think competition will be more localised, with enterprise-minded, cost-efficient (which most likely means Tory-run) councils attracting businesses from less dynamic, more budget-stressed neighbours — which

will mostly turn out to be Labour or Lib Dem fiefdoms. And so we see Osborne's political mind at work in a scheme that also takes heat off ministers by delegating troublesome decisions to lower levels of government. As a long-time critic of the previous business-rates regime, I greet the new one with cautious optimism: let's wait and see what it really does for local prosperity.

Canadian lessons

Another cunning Osborne plan revealed in his conference speech is the pooling of 89 council pension funds — accounting for some £180 billion of investments — into six larger 'wealth funds' that will be encouraged to invest in infrastructure projects. The model for this is Canada, whose teachers' and municipal employees' pension schemes just can't seem to buy enough public hardware at home and abroad, currently owning several of our ports and airports plus stakes in Anglian Water and Scottish gas as well as the High Speed One rail link to the Channel Tunnel.

The equivalent UK funds, by contrast, invest just half a per cent of their assets in infrastructure, compared with 8 per cent in countries with larger pooled funds. UK local authority fund trustees continue to place enormous sums — in an old-fashioned way that no doubt still involves lots of lunching, dining and Test match tickets — in passive 'tracker' funds run by City firms for fees that are as fat as competition allows. So pooling should lead to cost savings and smarter investing generally, as well as helping to rectify the dire shortage of UK infrastructure investors that recently sent Osborne kowtowing to Chinese institutions with a government guarantee pinned to his back in order to secure funds for the troubled Hinckley Point nuclear project.

And again there's the politics: sticking it to Unison and other public-sector unions that are such thorns in the Conservatives' side by redeploying their pension money to fund Osborne's pet projects, and rubbing it

in by hiring former Labour minister Lord Adonis to run a new National Infrastructure Commission that will assess future needs and 'hold any government's feet to the fire if it fails to deliver'.

Another long-held sentiment of this column is admiration for the brain (and political pragmatism) of Andrew Adonis. I'm only sorry he isn't planning to combine this new job with that of Mayor of London, for which he was once tipped: he would have made a better fist of it than Zac Goldsmith or Sadiq Khan, and perhaps he could have offered himself as candidate for both major parties.

Good Yorkshiremen

Denis Healey and my father Deryk Vander Weyer — a big cheese at Barclays and spokesman for the high-street banks during Healey's chancellorship — had a lot in common. Both were clever, cultured, iconoclastic products of good Yorkshire grammar schools; both wartime majors and post-war socialists (my father finally turned right when he began to appreciate the merits of Margaret Thatcher); both formidable in argument. 'Now then, young Deryk,' the then chancellor used to say, only half joking, 'You're the man to run the state bank for us after you're all nationalised.'

Thirty years later, the mellower Healey of old age came north to Helmsley to give a talk about his photography. On the strength of the 1970s connection, I invited him to lunch: he was one of the most entertaining guests I've ever had, radiating bonhomie and mischief, flirting gallantly with my widowed mother, ranging wide across literature and history, battling gamely through blank moments of short-term memory failure. Afterwards I took him to the station, with a big old-fashioned camera slung round his neck. An elderly man (though at least a decade younger than Denis) approached and shook his hand. 'Lord Healey? I never voted for your lot, but I want to thank you for your public service.' Denis beamed benignly, and took a picture of him.

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BOOKS & ARTS

David Kynaston is mesmerised by a big and brutal book on modernist architecture
Thomas W. Hodgkinson is worried that he will start crying and never stop
William Cook and **Ursula Buchan** celebrate the 100th anniversary of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*
Marcus Berkman says farewell to his pop column — and wonders why he was never sacked
Ian Thomson drinks whisky with J.G. Ballard
Lloyd Evans encounters the costliest and loveliest set he has ever seen



'The Countess-Duchess of Benavente', 1785, by Goya
Martin Gayford — p52

Big, brutal, bleak

Elain Harwood's flawed but impressive study of modernist architecture manages perfectly to reflect its subject, says *David Kynaston*

Space, Hope and Brutalism: English Architecture, 1945-1975

by Elain Harwood
Yale University Press, £50, pp. 703,
ISBN 9780300204469
Spectator Bookshop, £45

First things first: this is one of the heaviest books I have ever read. Eventually I finished with it resting uncomfortably on my knees, as I perched on the edge of my bed. It reminded me of when I met Jennifer Worth (of *Call the Midwife* fame) and she showed me her hardback copy of my own substantial tome *Austerity Britain* — neatly spliced in half to make two separate manageable entities. Reluctantly I can now see her point; but in the case of Elain Harwood's *Space, Hope and Brutalism*, the doorstopper's doorstopper, I doubt if I would have the strength to do the same.

The physical inconvenience of Harwood's book is doubly unfortunate because there is some evidence that Britain's often reviled modernist architecture of the quarter-century or so after the war is having a moment, to judge by two straws in the wind this autumn. London's annual Open House weekend included booking-only tours of Ernö Goldfinger's increasingly iconic Trellick Tower (on the right soon after leaving Paddington station), all tickets for which were snapped up within minutes; and much the same happened with the National Trust's Brutal Utopias season, featuring tours of the Southbank Centre, Denys Lasdun's University of East Anglia (students living in 'ziggurats') and the streets-in-the-sky of Sheffield's Park Hill estate. According to the trust, it is the young, not ageing nostalgics, who go on these tours — another sign, like Labour's new leader, of the appeal to that generation of the authentically honest and unvarnished.

Certainly it is the young who mainly occupy the pages of a complementary new book, Stefi Orazi's unashamedly celebratory *Modernist Estates: The buildings and the people who live in them today* (Frances Lincoln, £25). 'I've always wanted to live high up, and I am a fan of Brutalism and the generosity and intelligence of residential layouts designed at the time,' declares Maria Lisogorskaya, living on the 24th floor of

Goldfinger's Balfron Tower, east London's sister to Trellick. 'Concrete!' replies Katy Carroll when asked to name the best things about living in Park Hill. 'The interior/exterior space, the views afforded by the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, and the light they bring right into our living space.'

Irrespective of likes and dislikes, what happened to Britain's postwar built environment, especially between the late 1950s and early 1970s, is undeniably a resonant subject, one that has directly affected the daily lives of almost everyone ever since. The underlying driving forces of that profound physical transformation included the well-meaning, top-down values and assumptions of the newly created welfare state, a belief in the superior virtues of planning and communal living, the bewitching sway of Le Corbusier on cohorts of architectural students, an abhorrence of Victorianism (associated with plutocracy, urban squalor and ill-disciplined visual profusion), an

*What is the best thing about living in Park Hill?, a resident was asked.
'Concrete!'*

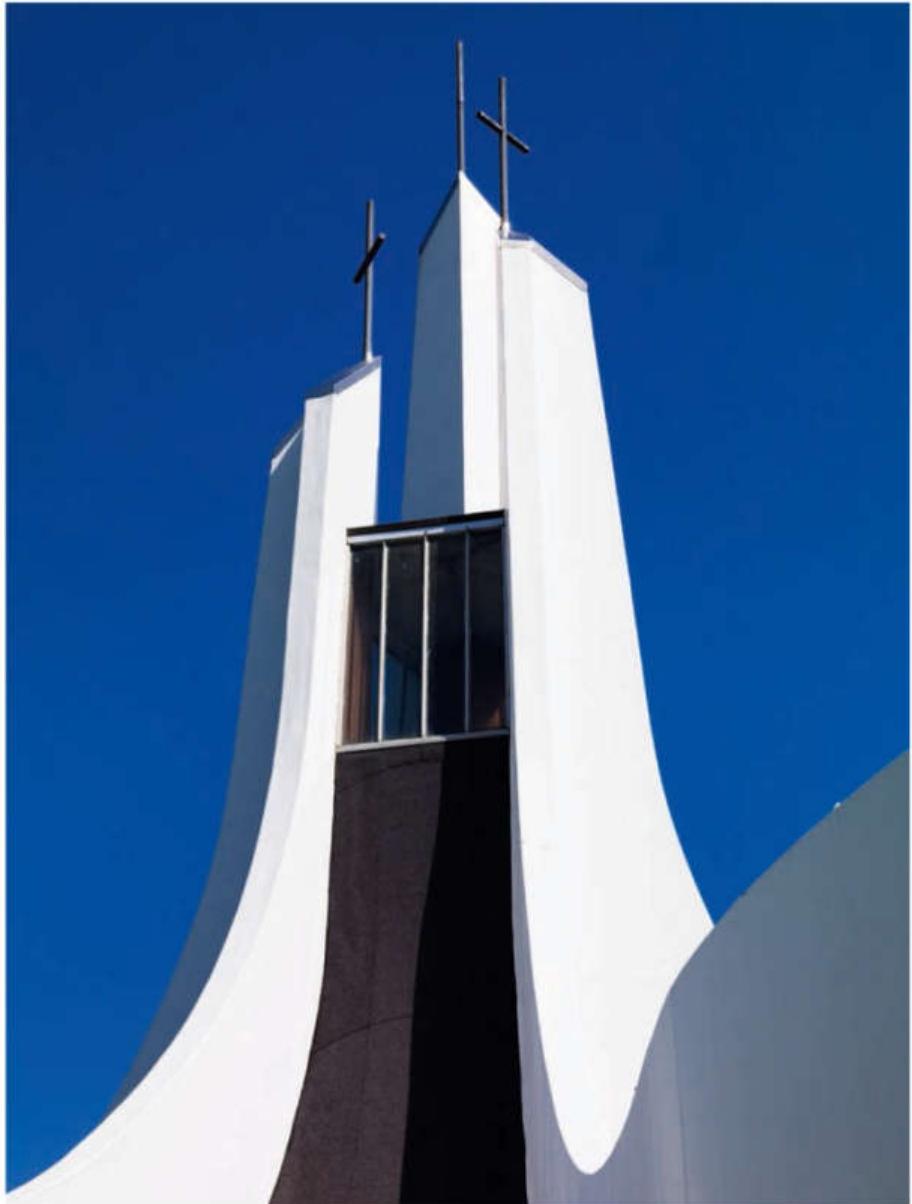
accompanying year-zero faith in progress and modernity, and an eye for the main chance on the part of aesthetically insensitive property developers. By the late 1960s, especially following the Ronan Point high-rise disaster of 1968, a reaction was palpably setting in; by the mid-1970s, amid economic crisis, an era was over.

At the core of Harwood's treatment are a dozen lengthy thematic chapters. The staples are there, of course — town centres, new towns, housing, schools, universities, commercial buildings, public buildings; but her detailed, near-comprehensive survey also takes in hospitals, transport, agriculture, religion, leisure and much else. Her technical expertise is formidable, the research is thorough, and she mostly avoids jargon. Altogether it is an astonishing achievement, matched only (in terms of the architectural history of postwar Britain) by Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius in their 1994 study of high-rise public housing, *Tower Block*. Like them, Harwood is a committed modernist, wholly buying into

the seductive fallacy that form must follow function; but she is seldom overtly didactic, and in a micro sense anyway her approach is essentially dispassionate.

Take, almost at random, the chapter on transport. Stockwell Bus Garage, Preston Bus Station, railway stations at Manchester (Oxford Road), Coventry and Birmingham (the now revamped New Street), Paddington Maintenance Depot, the City of London's 'Zidpark', the first generation of motorways and their service areas (the M1's Newport Pagnell the pioneer, still a time warp in 2015), the Severn Bridge, the Blackwall Tunnel, the Hammersmith Flyover, the Elephant and Castle subway-infested gyratory, the all-devouring Birmingham Inner Ring Road, the Scandinavian-style Gatwick Airport (on the late-1950s cusp of 'soft' modernism giving way to the brutalism of 'hard' modernism) — they are all here, invariably with illuminating information, and virtually the only omission I noticed was Reading Car Park, to which the *Financial Times* in 1968 devoted an entire survey.

And yet, and yet... Ultimately there is something sterile about this book, epitomised by the many illustrations, the great majority of which are recently taken photographs of surviving exteriors and interiors — handsomely reproduced, but with barely a person in sight. Indeed, it is the lack of people, in any interesting, flesh-and-blood sense, which is the biggest problem. Despite having assiduously interviewed many of the modernist architects, Harwood seldom if at all evokes them as individuals, with their often idealistic passions and arrogant mind-frames; while as for the people who actually lived in and used the buildings, they barely manage a walk-on part. Almost the only exception comes at the end of the chapter on hospitals, with one early patient at Northwick Park telling the *Wembley News* in 1970 that the curtains in the window made it 'homely' (that unfavourite modernist word), another that it was 'just like staying at the Hilton'. Admittedly the whole question of contemporary reactions is an intensely complicated one (more so than either modernists or anti-modernists usually admit); but Harwood should have had a stab.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
SIMONE DAVIES*Chapel, University of Lancaster, by Cassidy & Ashton, 1968–69*

Other criticisms also go beyond a mildly regretful tut-tut. In reality, the intellectual and aesthetic traffic during those years was far from exclusively in one direction, and it is a pity that Harwood neither draws out the debates nor explores the tortured souls of knowledgeable and perceptive witnesses like Lionel Brett (later Viscount Esher) or the great Ian Nairn, who desperately wanted the modernity project to succeed but became increasingly depressed by its flaws. The other key omission (which I find difficult to forgive) is any real consideration of all the destruction involved — destruction that often went beyond the physical (Euston Arch, Coal Exchange, etc) and involved the wanton scattering to the four winds of communities that could never be reassembled. In this vast book, almost unbelievably, we hear barely a heartfelt whisper from John Betjeman.

Why, beyond Ronan Point and fiscal pressures, did the reaction against modernism eventually arrive? Harwood rightly points to the breakdown of the postwar centre-ground political consensus, but there was much else that played its part in the changing zeitgeist. Take the Beatles: the acme of modernity back in 1962, just five years later they were celebrating in ‘Being for the Benefit of Mr Kite!’ the pre-modern. Moreover, a few years further on, by the early 1970s, something potentially major was afoot: localism (go to any big-city local studies library and see the rash of community newspapers from that time), small is beautiful, feminism (the politics of the domestic), the real ale movement. With more imaginative leadership on Labour’s part — less male, fewer union barons, fewer smoke-filled rooms — the 1970s might have played out very differently. After all, most

people most of the time want a better yesterday; the shame about modernism, long before the advent of Margaret Thatcher, was that that comforting possibility was debarred from the table.

In the end, inevitably, there is always a subjective quality about architecture. Speaking personally, if given the unattractive choice between old-school brutalism and new-school infantilism (the Cheese-grater, the Walkie-Talkie, et al), I know which, despite everything, I would tend to prefer. Indeed, near Junction 12 of the M25 one passes under a strikingly brutalist bridge — defiantly there, take it or leave it — of which I have grown curiously fond. Even so, there are limits; and as with Neil Young’s *After the Gold Rush* album, where one ‘Southern Man’ is quite enough, a preference for the intimate and the mellifluous is only human.



The Winter Palace, St Petersburg, 1840, by Ferdinand Victor Perrot (Pushkin Museum)

Art in a cultural void

Duncan Fallowell

My Hermitage: How the Hermitage Survived Tsars, Wars, and Revolution to Become the Greatest Museum in the World

by Mikhail Piotrovsky
 Skira Rizzoli, £30, pp. 384,
 ISBN 9780847843787
 Spectator Bookshop, £27

The front cover of this book describes the Hermitage as ‘the Greatest Museum in the World’. That sobriquet must go to the Louvre. The Hermitage is perhaps the second greatest, one which its current director Mikhail Piotrovsky calls an ‘encyclopaedic’ museum, housing ‘the culture of humanity, which is represented in all its variety...’ Not quite. Like the Louvre or the other encyclopaedic museums, the Met in New York say, or the Kunsthistorisches in Vienna, it does not incorporate primitive or folk art. London doesn’t have anything directly comparable: it would be as though the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Victoria and Albert, the Royal Collections and a bit of Tate Modern were all rolled into one.

We learn that it currently attracts three million visitors a year, whereas in the late Soviet era it was four million. Immediately after the collapse of communism it went down to one million, and this was the period when I lived a few doors away from it on Ulitsa Khalturina and came to know the Hermitage well. It was so quiet, especially in winter: the best time to visit. You could wander in and out for a very modest fee. A friend of mine worked there, but there was no work for him to do, so he was always on holiday

and would take me behind the scenes. The restoration department seemed to have come from the late Renaissance. Among the staff, you saw something you don’t always see in Russia, happy people with bright eyes, smiling and making jokes (well, they do work in the most delicious place in town). Football was played in its inner courtyards. There were dancing bears by the south portico, and gypsies covered in soot rushed at you in Palace Square. One day I saw boys staving in the basement windows of the general staff building with the front wheels of their bicycles — something had to change, and it did.

What also astounded me were the floors. St Petersburg has the most beautiful wooden floors in the world, many of them in the Hermitage. I wonder why Piotrovsky doesn’t

The Hermitage evokes a remote despotism playing cultural catch-up, wanting things of every possible sort

mention them. How I felt for those floors, trodden on by hordes down the centuries — and with no overshoes! But however many times I visited the place, I never mastered it. I nearly always got lost; artefacts or rooms I wanted to revisit but could never find again. Quite right too. A great museum has to be a labyrinth in which you become lost; it’s part of the magic.

With the Hermitage this is exacerbated by its lack of internal cohesion. The museum comprises the Winter Palace and sundry annexes, both historical and recent. What is striking about the Winter Palace is that behind its ethereal eau de Nil façade no room relates stylistically to any other; and the same goes for the various Hermitage extensions. Here a copy of the Raphael

Loggia, there a version of English Palladianism, beyond them a hall in Russian neoclassicism, now the weird Malachite Room or a quasi-Greek temple, or rococo boudoir or forest of golden columns, or vault of an unidentifiable kind — Gothic, Byzantine, Saracenic? It evokes the sense of a remote despotism playing cultural catch-up, wanting things of every possible sort, with no overall pattern. And like the Louvre’s, its content has been further engorged by revolution and mass confiscations. Sokurov’s film *Russian Ark* tried to impose a pattern by taking you through the Hermitage in one shot. It didn’t work. The film is somehow fogeyish, failing to capture the museum’s crazy splendour.

Piotrovsky’s book reflects this incoherence. For a start it is not remotely the book I thought it was going to be. Piotrovsky’s father was also a director of the Hermitage, and Mikhail is sitting on an Everest of personal anecdote and insider knowledge. Very little of that makes it into these pages. Actually it’s a dossier: of nearly 400, fewer than 70 full pages are written by Piotrovsky. The rest are illustrations with extended captions supplied by others. But even Piotrovsky’s contribution seems to have been put together by a number of committees: it is awash with non sequiturs, unexplained references, repetitions, special pleading disguised as assertion, and manipulative phraseology (‘democratic aristocracy’ is worthy of Dean Swift). There are some weird errors (Piotrovsky doesn’t know that ‘dialogue’ was invented by the Ancient Greeks). And the translation can only have made it worse: murky, poorly punctuated. Just to ensure you remain pretty clueless, annotated floor-plans are omitted. The illustrations, however, are fabulous.

No major issues are entirely avoided. The sales from the Hermitage by the communists are mentioned in several places, though not itemised (the best went to Andrew Mellon via whom in due course they formed the core collection of the National Gallery in Washington). The Hermitage works claimed by Germany are dealt with in a special insert which appears not to have been written by Piotrovsky at all. Entitled ‘Displacing Displaced Objects’ it is in a different typeface and on different coloured paper from the Piotrovsky pages. It is more or less incomprehensible and in places petulant — the Russian case, which I hope is a reasonable one, is not well served by it.

Not a single Soviet leader ever made an official visit to the Hermitage; and it was thought that after years of oppression, post-Soviet St Petersburg would burst into a great era of creativity. But alas, uptight, puritanical Putinism has turned the city into even more of a cultural backwater than under late communism. So I wonder if Piotrovsky will ever be able to write the book which is really in him. Traditionally Russians have had to go into exile to do such things. I expect they still do.

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In fear of tears

Thomas W. Hodgkinson

Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears

by Thomas Dixon

Oxford University Press, £25, pp. 456,

ISBN 9780199676057

Spectator Bookshop, £22

The last time I cried was September 1989. That was my first week at public school.

The reason I cried was that my allocated room-mate, a malevolent pixie named Toby Cox who later became one of my closest friends, had informed me that he 'knew a lot of people' at Harrow and he was going to tell them all that I was 'a total dick'. I bawled. I blubbered, and a cord of saliva swung from my lower lip, as I begged for mercy. He refused. And I haven't cried since.

Not at the deaths of pets or relatives. Not at the break-ups of relationships. There's something satisfying, I suppose, in fulfilling so completely a national stereotype. And I feel even more satisfied after reading Thomas Dixon's excellent history of the British attitude to tears, which suggests that the stiff upper lip has been an even rarer, more fleeting phenomenon than I had imagined.

There's evidence, going back centuries, of the British as rubicund beef-eaters, suspicious of pretension, prone to violence. But dry-eyed and stoical, not so much. True, Dixon finds a fore-echo in 16th-century Protestant scepticism towards Catholic histrionics. Hence our word 'maudlin', an allusion to Mary Magdalene, who misguidedly wept on finding Christ's tomb empty.

Yet in the 17th century, we see Oliver Cromwell (not usually thought of as a softy) sobbing so prolifically at prayer that his tears trickled out under the closet door. And then, in the second half of the 18th century, came the Age of Sensibility, which found expression in the rise of the novel. As developed by the likes of Samuel Richardson and Fanny Burney, these 'portable narrative performances', as Dixon describes them, were, at least in part, devices for making people cry. In those days, it was the height of fashion to burst into tears at just about anything.

According to Dixon's book — which is so well written, to the point and enlightening that there were times I almost wept — it wasn't until the British empire reached maturity in the 19th century that we learnt to bite our lower lips to stop them wobbling, while keeping our upper ones as stiff as staple-guns. Awfully important, old chap, not to let the natives see you blub. That word 'blub', incidentally, was invented in the 1860s. A decade later, Charles Darwin observed that 'Englishmen rarely cry', con-

trasting this with the lachrymosity of our continental cousins.

Within a century, though, the upper lip began to twitch and quiver. Surveys suggest that by the 1950s we were as prone to sob in the cinema as now: that's to say, about 40 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women admitted and admit to it. No dry-eyed scholar, the author confesses to being a 'sucker' for tear-jerking TV. Perhaps the classic contemporary example of the form is the ITV talent show *The X Factor*, which introduces contestants with brief biographical videos that are shamelessly designed to snip spinal columns, and reduce us all to car-thumping banshees.

And here we come to a theory that Dixon raises but doesn't sufficiently explore: the idea that tears flow most voluminously at times of what he calls 'momentous existential transition'. A wedding. A graduation. The funeral of a parent. As well as everything else wept about on these occasions, people weep at what they're leaving behind, the death of their former selves.

The important thing here is the sense of transition. That's why *The X Factor*, in its

We weep at what we are leaving behind, the death of our former selves

celebration of sobbing, has prioritised those videos, which emphasise the pain contestants have been through or the drabness of their backgrounds. The point is that to appear on the show and shine could change their lives forever. Yet — and here's the rub — in order to sing, they have to keep it together.

Which brings us to another of Dixon's insights, namely that few things are more likely to make us cry than the sight of someone else trying not to. Thus it was that, during an early instalment of this year's series, after the soundly-built Filipina housewife Neneth Lyons had finished belting out 'Somewhere', and her face contorted as, beneath flared nostrils, her smile became wretchedly inverted, I found myself clutching the arms of my revolving chair in my little sitting room, my hair rearing on end, my knuckles milk-white with the effort of retaining self-control.

For this, you see, is the fear that haunts me: that one day I shall just start crying while watching an episode of *The X Factor*. And then, perhaps, I won't ever stop.

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La France complexe

Henry Jeffreys

End Games in Bordeaux

by Allan Massie

Quartet, £12, pp. 280,

ISBN 9780704373761

Spectator Bookshop, £10.90

In a recent book review, the historian Norman Stone wrote: 'Maybe the second world war can now be left to novelists.' Perhaps he was thinking of Allan Massie's 1989 masterpiece *A Question of Loyalties*, an utterly convincing portrayal of a man making all the wrong choices for the noblest reasons in Vichy France. It's such fertile territory that Massie has returned to it for a quartet of detective novels set in Occupied Bordeaux.

The final part, *End Games in Bordeaux*, sees Superintendent Lannes suspended at the wishes of his German overlords. He is politically suspect but there isn't much to do anyway: 'Nobody's been murdering anybody, except what they will call war-work,' one character says. Lannes's family embodies the conflicts within France. One son, Alain, has fled to London to fight with De Gaulle. The mother's favourite, Dominique, is in Vichy working to instil patriotic values in deprived children and, most tragically of all, his daughter, Clothilde, has fallen in love with a deluded patriot called Michel who joins the Germans fighting on the Eastern Front. This is vintage Massie — where we would see a fanatical Nazi, Massie gives us an easily led and not terribly bright idealist.

Lannes isn't any more popular with the Resistance, who appear as little more than gangsters extorting money in return for protection when the war is over. I hope I'm not spoiling things too much to say that the Germans lose. Whereas the earlier novels are languid and claustrophobic, *End Games* has almost too much action for such a short book. There are moments of breathtaking excitement as Massie cuts between protagonists in Bordeaux, London, Paris and Russia. Lannes, so commanding in the early days of the war, now appears naive. Everyone around him is playing realpolitik whereas he charges around like a knight errant trying to solve crimes, right wrongs and save people he hardly knows. Unable to align with either side, he is suspected by both.

His son Dominique is wiser, making contact with the Resistance even while working for Vichy. The smoothest politician of all is François Mitterrand, who has a cameo role in the series first as a Vichy functionary and then as a leading light in the Resistance. 'Vichy was necessary. I'll never deny that — except in public,' he says at one point. Finishing Massie's Bordeaux Quartet, it's hard to imagine how any work of history could give one a better understanding of the complexities of Occupied France.



W.G. Grace, by W.T. Wilson, 1887: Grace is beginning to show signs of the gluttony that marked his late career

COURTESY OF MARYBONE CRICKET CLUB

Sport's first celebrity

Alex Massie

Amazing Grace: The Man who was W.G.

by Richard Tomlinson
Little, Brown, £25, pp. 413,
ISBN 9781408705179
Spectator Bookshop, £21

Gilbert: The Last Years of W.G. Grace

by Charlie Connelly
Bloomsbury, £10.99, pp. 190,
ISBN 9781472917584
Spectator Bookshop, £9.89

Should you wish to have a good copy of the 1916 edition of *Wisden*, cricket's annual bible, you should be prepared to part with at least £5,000 and, quite possibly, much more than that. This reflects its rarity — the Great War ensured that the almanac had a limited print run — but also the significance of its contents. For the 1916 edition carries the obituaries of Victor Trumper, the wondrous Australian nonpareil and of course, the greatest Champion of them all: W.G. Grace.

The summer game had never seen any-

English season, for instance, 17 centuries were scored in first-class matches; Grace accounted for ten of them, averaging 78 for the season. No one else averaged more than 40.

Grace, as David Frith has observed, took batting 'from its middle ages of development into something that moderns will instantly recognise'. His instinct was to attack wherever possible, and his dominance was such that Tom Emmett, the great Yorkshire fast bowler, complained that 'he ought to be made to play with a littler bat'. With this came a famous gamesmanship and an attitude to expenses that we might now deem to be of parliamentary scale.



'You can't put a price on something like that.'

thing like Grace before and never will again. Other cricketers have scored more runs and taken more wickets than Grace but none did so in more pressing circumstances. The pitches Grace played on in his prime were wicked creatures upon which, most of the time, even the greatest batsmen could never feel in total control. It was a time when batsmen at Lord's routinely found themselves picking stones out of the wicket. To put it another way, as Richard Tomlinson notes in his new biography, it is very much easier to imagine Grace thriving in modern conditions than it is to imagine current players coping with the kind of cricket Grace dominated.

Only Don Bradman rivals him. The Don's test average of 99.94 makes Grace's career average of 39 seem unfusseworthy. Yet the manner in which Grace dominated his contemporaries was, well, Bradmanesque. In the 1871

1895, by which time he was 47, proved his Indian summer. First came his hundredth first-class century, then he became the first man to score 1,000 runs by the end of May. *Wisden*, then coming into its own itself, declared him the cricketer of the year. A subscription fund keenly promoted by the *Daily Telegraph* raised, in modern terms, more than £1 million for the Champion. Lord Salisbury, leader of the Tory party, contributed £5; not to be outdone, Lord Rosebery, the Liberal prime minister, chipped in £25. No wonder Tomlinson considers Grace 'the first truly modern international sports star'. The Doctor was not merely famous, he was, in the modern sense, a celebrity too.

Tomlinson, who has a snappy impatience with many of Grace's previous biographers, rejects the notion Grace was a simple yokel. On the contrary, his approach to batting was quasi-scientific and the Doctor was more intelligent than he seemed. Nevertheless, Tomlinson over-reaches at times. Thus W.G.'s gluttony was 'perhaps a self-defeating attempt to cope with increasing competitive

The difficulty with Grace, as with Bradman, is explaining why he was so much better than his contemporaries

pressure' or he 'may also have been seeking release from private sorrows as he grew older'. Or, possibly, he simply enjoyed eating.

The difficulty with Grace, as with Bradman, comes in explaining just why he was so much better than all his contemporaries. One might as well seek an explanation for Shakespeare or Mozart. Sometimes things just are as they are, resisting any explanation.

Charlie Connelly's novella, a picaresque tour of the Champion's final years, does its best to conquer this obstacle but, like Tomlinson, proves unequal to the task. Asked by a journalist how it felt to bring up his hundredth hundred, Grace offers nothing but a dead bat: 'I knew it was hit well enough that I wouldn't need to run.'

Connelly's imagination is warm, however, and his book is a charming curiosity. A melancholy one, too, as Grace grapples with the death, from typhoid, of his beloved daughter Bessie and recalls, too, the passing of his own brother Fred. Old age is a shipwreck and the Doctor was marooned too. He died raging, like Lear with a bat, against the terror of German zeppelin raids on London.

And with him passed an era. In this, the centenary of his death, Grace seems as unique and unfathomable as ever. C.L.R. James, the great Trinidadian writer and cultural critic, still put it best: Grace was a 'pre-eminent Victorian'. Through him, 'cricket, the most complete expression of popular life in pre-industrial England, was incorporated into the life of the nation. As far as any social activity can be the work of any one man, he did it.' The Champion built it and we still play it.

Worse things happen at sea

Adam Nicolson

A Mile Down: The true story of a disastrous career at sea

by David Vann

William Heinemann, £18.99, pp. 242,
ISBN 9780434021956
Spectator Bookshop, £16.99

When the novelist David Vann was 13, his father — a difficult, unhappy dreamer in his thirties, constantly in dread, as Vann puts it, 'of becoming something other than what he had always imagined himself to be', and who had failed first as a dentist and then as a commercial fisherman in Alaska — blew his head off while talking on the phone to his second wife. 'She heard parts of his head dripping from the ceiling,' Vann told the *New York Times* not long ago. 'She still can't use the phone with that ear.'

That history of grief, violence and trouble haunts every page of this memoir. When it begins, 30-year-old Vann, with his cool and beautiful Nancy by his side, has already had some sea-adventures and disasters. He has done well professionally and has taught creative writing at Stanford and Cornell. He is kicking around the coast of Turkey and outside Bodrum he sees a giant, beautiful steel hull, 90 foot long, waiting to be fitted out and finished. He is smitten with its possibilities of escape and fulfilment. A cartoon Turk called Seref, president of the Bodrum Chamber of Commerce, winds him in with little cups of coffee and plates of *galaktoboureko*. Vann borrows money like there is no tomorrow — a total of \$600,000, from friends, relations and credit card companies, dreaming of the future in which this steel hull will become the beautifully varnished floating, cruising classroom in which to take foreigners on educational tours of the Caribbean and the Med.

You gaze entranced as his destiny unfolds. Seref is a cheat. Hugely expensive diesel engines are wrongly installed and seawater corrodes them from inside. Smooth expensive paint falls off the hull, decks leak, the steering system is rubbish, money runs out and the world becomes a prison of despair. Why did he ever imagine that running a large boat might be a version of freedom?

Vann must ooze charm. He persuades ever more friends and acquaintances to lend him more money and eventually he heads off in the completed boat for its winter cruising grounds in the Caribbean. Calypso never

Vann pulls off the most gripping passage of sea-catastrophe writing I have read outside Conrad

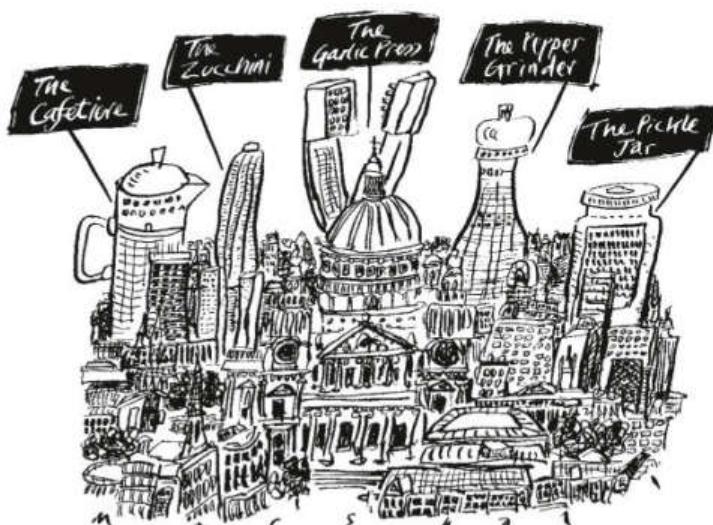
promised a more delicious destination. But this is an Odyssean piece of mythopoiesis and off the coast of Morocco, at night, in a rising wind, Vann's journey turns for Hades.

At first the hydraulics come adrift of the rudder and then the rudder itself falls away. No steering in an increasingly wild stretch of the Atlantic. For the following 30 pages Vann pulls off the most gripping passage of sea-catastrophe writing I have read outside Conrad, a chest-tightening, concretely detailed, cold, sickening and cumulatively desperate depiction of life turning murderous. By his own account, using only the throttles on the two big Perkins diesels, he manages his big and ungainly craft in huge and steepening seas. A German freighter hovers nearby, vulturine, waiting to claim the boat for salvage. A Moroccan helicopter arrives but has no radio and cannot communicate. Eventually, after titanic struggles, Vann's boat is taken in tow, he gets his crew into a life raft and in thrashing, rolling breakers climbs aboard the German ship, everyone safe, and his life in ruins.

You can't help but admire Vann the

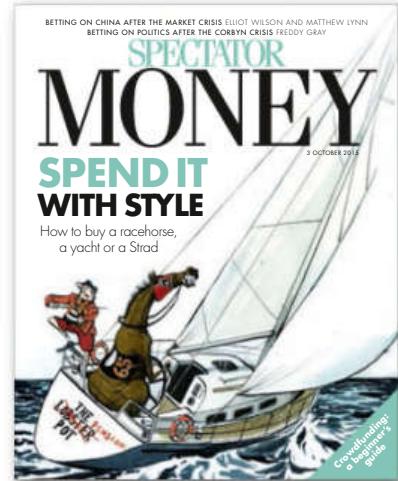
writer. Any addict of heavy weather sailing should settle into a great evening by the fire for this passage alone. But Vann the man is a rather different matter. Almost no one comes well out of this story except the sainted Nancy. Men in dockyards, lawyers, employees: virtually all are dark and untrustworthy. His honesty about his own failings — a cocktail of discontent, self-justification, unhappiness, fear, guilt, shame, self-pity and persecution — is so extreme it is almost toxic. Complicated legal and financial wrangles ensue until eventually the replacement rudder falls off again, taking a bit of hull with it, and the boat sinks into over 5,000 feet of water, a mile down, with Nancy and Vann once again floating free.

Perhaps this book is about the gap between writer and man. Take for example his wonderful description of the beauties of welding, 'the funnel of energy shielded by the inert gas', 'a miniature environment of purity', the aluminium forming 'a molten crescent moon', a process 'as beautiful as writing or love'. Irresistible, visionary. But then Google 'David Vann welds scary' and you will be brought face to face with something else: blobs of half-attached metal, hopelessly done, the essential inadequacy of the home-made trimaran in which Vann made a (later, failed) attempt to sail around the world. But he could write it perfect.



The evolving London skyline

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Buchan in the Borders

To celebrate the centenary of the publication of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, William Cook travelled to Tweeddale, where John Buchan spent his youthful summers

Like Richard Hannay, I had to run to catch the early morning train from London to Edinburgh. Thankfully, unlike Hannay, I wasn't wanted for murder — I'd merely overslept again. As the train pulled out of King's Cross, I fished out my old Penguin edition of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Hannay's first — and most famous — adventure. Each time I reread it, I marvel at what a brilliant book it is — how modern it still seems, how easily it draws you in. As we raced through England towards Buchan's beloved Borders, I rejoined Hannay on his mad dash across the country, urging him on in his heroic quest to save Britain from the beastly Hun. By the time I'd turned the final page, we'd already reached Berwick. Buchan understood the value of clear and simple writing. He also knew the power of a rattling good yarn.

This year marks the centenary of the publication of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* — the template for countless spy stories and the inspiration for Hitchcock's greatest film. A hundred years since Buchan wrote this slim book to wile away a dreary convalescence, his hero Richard Hannay remains the archetypal man of action, the father of James Bond. *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is a tale of derring-do, but it's also a heartfelt homage to the landscape of the Scottish Lowlands. What better way would there be to mark this centenary than to visit Buchan's native land, guided by his granddaughter, Deborah Stewartby? It feels a bit like playing truant, but isn't that what *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is all about?

Lady Stewartby meets me off the train at Waverley, demurely dressed in pale green tweed, as elegant and timeless as one of Buchan's heroines. For her, Buchan's legacy has been nothing but a bonus — she's full of admiration for him — but for her father, William Buchan 3rd Baron Tweedsmuir, the writer's fame cast a longer shadow. The second generation of descendants is always freer than the first.

We drive through Edinburgh, past the Pentland Hills and out into rolling countryside. Now we're in the Borders, a land unknown to most Englishmen. I've only been here once before and had forgotten how beautiful it is. It's gentler than the Highlands, a pattern of rounded hills and soft meadows. 'Such an important part of what he writes about is the landscape,' says Deborah. You can see why he set so many stories here. It's a perfect hideaway.

Buchan was born in Perth, brought up

in Glasgow and spent much of his adult life in England, but here in Tweeddale is where his soul resides. This winding river valley was his mother's homeland. This was where he spent his youthful summers, hiking across the moors and fishing in the Tweed. 'Borderlands are special,' says Deborah. Her grandfather agreed. 'My chief passion,' he recalled, 'was for the Border countryside, and my object in all my prentice writings was to reproduce its delicate charm.' His thrillers were really pastorals. As Graham Greene observed: 'What is remarkable about these adventure stories is the completeness of the world they describe.'

It's tempting to treat Buchan's books as treasure hunts, but it doesn't really work that way. 'John Buchan was a novelist,' says Deborah. 'He wasn't writing a guidebook.' There are some local landmarks in his novels but that's not what Buchan is about. His great achievement lies in capturing the sub-

I reckon fortitude's the biggest thing a man can have. Just go on enduring when there's no guts or heart left in you'

tle ambience of the Lowlands rather than shackling his stories to specific sites. He conjures up the atmosphere, the feeling of a place. 'The air had the queer rooty smell of bogs, but it was as fresh as mid-ocean,' says Hannay. 'It had the strangest effect on my spirits. I actually felt light-hearted.' Breathing in this fertile scent of wood and water I realise what he meant.

We arrive in Peebles, a handsome market town surrounded by a ring of bare-backed hills. The setting is spectacular, an inspiration for any writer. Buchan's family owned Bank House, a robust townhouse beside the Tweed, but the main attraction is the John Buchan Story, a charming museum in a grand old hunting lodge on the high street. There's loads of personal ephemera — photos, letters, bric-a-brac — which really bring him back to life. 'He's much loved in this part of the world,' says Deborah, and the museum articulates that affection. Buchan loved the Borders and the Borders still loves him back.

Deborah shows me round. She's far too modest to admit it, but she's played a large part in the museum's success. A couple of years ago, it was even visited by the Queen. A reading room contains a complete collection of Buchan's published works, together

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with letters from luminaries such as Rudyard Kipling, Winston Churchill and Lawrence of Arabia. 'I cannot thank you enough for all the help you gave me with my speeches,' reads a letter from King George VI.

Born in 1875, the son of a Presbyterian minister, Buchan squeezed the work of several lifetimes into 64 crowded years. A lawyer, a politician and a journalist (for *The Spectator*), he ended up a baron and Governor General of Canada. He died of a brain haemorrhage in 1940, in Montreal.

Deborah never knew her grandfather (he died before she was born) but her father told her a lot about him. The portrait she paints for me is of a kind and courteous man — a natural diplomat, but (like many great writers) reticent and withdrawn. 'There was always a part of him that he kept to himself,' she says. 'He was a very private man.' Although he was talented in so many ways, the success of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* astounded him. 'He never got over his amazement at how popular it was.'

Buchan wrote four more Hannay novels ('he was a practical Scot, and he discovered that they made money'), but though they were mainly written for fun and profit, Deborah believes these books also had a higher purpose. 'JB had two things that he wanted to say — always. One was that the veneer of civilisation is very thin... And the other thing was, he wanted people to realise that evil comes in very attractive forms.' It was an important message for those difficult times — and for our times, too. 'I think people are discovering that he had things to say about much that is troubling us now.' Hannay's second adventure, *Greenmantle*, about a charismatic guerrilla leader who whips



The scene in Hitchcock's film in which Pamela (Madeleine Carroll) removes her stocking while handcuffed to Hamny (Robert Donat) gives off an erotic spark to this day

THE KOBAL COLLECTION

up an Islamist uprising in the Middle East, could almost have been written with Osama bin Laden in mind. Yet Buchan never forgot that writing is useless unless it entertains. 'A story has to have a beginning, a middle and an end, and he was a very good storyteller,' says Deborah.

Despite a succession of demanding jobs and a lifetime of ill-health (probably Crohn's disease, still undiagnosed at the time) Buchan somehow managed to write 100 books. 'The thing I wish I had was his powers of concentration!' says Deborah. His 30 novels are best remembered, but he also published numerous biographies, and a 24-volume history of the Great War, written contemporaneously, which appeared fortnightly in the *Times*.

His life was far from plain sailing — his brother and his best friend were killed on the same day in the first world war — but his Calvinist upbringing gave him an inner resilience and self-discipline which carried him through life. 'I reckon fortitude's the biggest thing a man can have,' he wrote. 'Just to go on enduring when there's no guts or heart left in you.' No wonder his favourite book was *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He loved its plain narrative, 'its picture of life as a pilgrimage over hill and dale'. It's a summary that could double as a description of his own writing.

We drive on, through fields and forests, past the ruins of ancient hilltop forts, to Broughton, the village where the young Buchan spent his summers with his grandparents. Their farmhouse is just as Buchan described it, 'at the mouth of a shallow glen, bounded by high green hills'. Today Deborah lives in this historic house with her

husband Lord Stewartby — like Buchan, a former Tory MP. I am shown the room where Buchan used to write, and where his parents were married. As we drink tea in the kitchen, a dog dozing beside the stove, Buchan's friendly ghost feels very close at hand.

Deborah drives me back to Waverley to catch the last train to London. As Buchan's Borderland fades into bland suburbia, I recall something he wrote in his autobiography shortly before he died: 'The Border hills were my own possession, a countryside in which my roots ran deep.' Like so many of his countrymen, Buchan was a Scottish patriot and an ardent unionist. 'The narrower kinds of fanaticism, which have run riot elsewhere in Scotland, rarely affected the Borders,' he wrote in 1940. His lush Border *Heimat* is now the only Conservative seat in Scotland. I wonder what he'd think?

As my train heads south, I take up *The Thirty-Nine Steps* again for the umpteenth time. After my literary outing, Buchan's evocation of the Lowlands seems more vivid than ever. He himself called the book a 'shocker'. I reckon it's actually a poem in disguise. 'I always felt a little ashamed that profit should accrue from what had given me so much amusement,' he reflected towards the end of his busy life. 'I had no purpose in writing except to please myself; and even if my books had not found a single reader I would have felt amply repaid.'

The enduring appeal of a 'shocker'

Ursula Buchan casts further light on her grandfather's famous novel

Up the stairs with flying feet,
You would burst upon us, cheering
Wellington's funereal street.
Fresh as paint, though you'd been 'railing
Up from Scotland all the night,
Or had just returned from scaling
Some appalling Dolomite...
Pundit, publicist and jurist:
Statistician and divine;
Mystic, mountaineer and purist
In the high financial line;
Prince of journalistic sprinters —
Swiftest that I ever knew —
Never did you keep the printers
Longer than an hour or two...
Still I hope with kindly feeling
You recall the days of yore,
When I watched you gaily reeling
Off your folios by the score;
Self-effacing, self-suppressing
When your elder took the reins,
Though at half his age possessing
Twice and more than twice his brains.

In 1907, Charles Graves, who worked for *The Spectator*, wrote the above

valedictory poem to mark the departure of his part-time colleague, John Buchan. This piece of high-class doggerel hits a number of nails firmly on the head: in particular Buchan's modesty, fizzing vitality and remarkable intellect, as well as the speed at which he worked and the variety of his occupations and preoccupations.

He had first written for *The Spectator* (owned and edited by St Loe Strachey and based then in Wellington Street) in 1900, and worked for Strachey, off and on,

What is plain is that the prominence of the book has succeeded in obscuring most of the other things Buchan deserves to be remembered for

between 1901 and 1907, becoming assistant editor in 1906. In all he wrote 800 articles, mostly anonymously, so that the full variety of his output has only recently been uncovered. His subjects ranged from foreign policy to Bergson's philosophy to the glamour of mountaineering to new poetry.

Graves's valediction was prompted by Buchan's decision to leave *The Spectator*, as well as the Bar, in order to work for Thomas Nelson and Son, an Edinburgh publishing company with a London office. He was engaged to marry Susan Grosvenor who, though very sweet and intelligent, had no money of her own, yet by reason of her privileged upbringing was quite unable to boil an egg or sew on a button. He needed a larger and surer income to afford a London establishment big enough to accommodate servants. Despite his change of career, he continued to write for *The Spectator* from time to time until the early 1930s.

As well as journalist and barrister, he was at various times colonial administrator, head of wartime propaganda, member of Parliament, novelist, poet, historian, public thinker and viceroy. But his name has been made, seemingly for all eternity, by a short spy thriller which he wrote in a few weeks for his own amusement.

In August 1914 Buchan took a family holiday in Broadstairs, Kent; a duodenal ulcer was playing up badly and his doctor recommended rest. There he began his second 'shocker' (the first was *The Power House*), finishing it when ordered to bed again in December. The book's dedication, to his friend and business partner, Tommy Nelson, defines the 'shocker' as a 'romance where the incidents defy the probabilities, and march just inside the borders of the possible', which, taking in all the coincidences as well as the explosive incident with the lentonite, seems about right. The novel was serialised in *Blackwood's Magazine* between July and September 1915, and appeared in book form in October, when it was an immediate critical and commercial

success, selling 25,000 copies in the first six weeks.

The plot was, of course, informed by the febrile international situation in the summer of 1914; the title came from the number of wooden steps that led down to a Broadstairs beach, counted for Buchan by his six-year-old daughter, Alice.

The tense, fast-moving, first-person narrative contains surprisingly interesting characterisations for an adventure story, not to mention deft and vivid descriptions of landscape and weather, for which Buchan was to become renowned. It has all his hallmarks of brevity, clarity, keen observation and wry humour. The South African Hannay irritates some readers by his heartiness, robust colonial utterances and emphasis on getting a job done, but we shouldn't forget he was conceived in wartime. I like his resourcefulness, sensitivity to atmosphere and cheerful courage. Although at least partly modelled on General Sir Edmund Ironside, Hannay is, in many ways, the average man who knows his limitations, and is thus someone with whom readers can readily identify. The book was very popular with soldiers in the trenches.

In 1934, Alfred Hitchcock bought the option to film the book from Buchan, by now a very well-known writer and politician. *The 39 Steps*, possibly the first 'man-on-the-run' thriller ever filmed, made Hitchcock famous in America for the first time when it came out in 1935. Much of the plot was changed to accommodate a love interest and to reflect the different international situation, 20 years on from 1915. Hannay, played by Robert Donat, acquires a beautiful but reluctant companion, Pamela (Madeleine Carroll). The scene where they have to share a room in a Scottish inn and she removes her stocking, while handcuffed to him, gives off an erotic spark even now. An amused Buchan told Hitchcock at the premiere that the film was a great improvement on the book; only my loyal granny could never be reconciled to Hitchcock changing the story.

The novel inspired two later films and a television adaptation, but it's the Hitchcock film that has become an international cultural icon; so much so that a jolly, send-up stage version of it has played to audiences all over the world for the past ten years. We shall never know whether the book would have remained in print continuously for a century without the film industry promoting it so assiduously. What is plain is that its prominence has succeeded in obscuring many of the other things for which John Buchan deserves to be remembered.

Ursula Buchan could only manage 300 articles in her 26 years as The Spectator's gardening columnist. She is presently engaged in writing a biography of John Buchan for Bloomsbury.

Alongside Beans

weeding alongside beans in the same rush as them

6 a.m. scrabbling at the earth

beans synchronised in rows
soft fanatical irresponsible beans
behind my back
breaking out of their mass grave

at first, just a rolled up flag
then a bayonet a pair of gloved hands

then a shocked corpse hurrying up in prayer
and then another

and then (as if a lock had gone and the Spring had broken loose)
a hoverfly

not looking up but lost in pause
landing its full-stop
on a bean leaf

(and what a stomach bursting from its zips
what a nervous readiness attached to its lament and
using the sound as a guard rail over the drop)

and then another

and after a while a flower
turning its head to the side like a bored emperor
and after a while a flower

singing out a faint line of scent
and spinning around the same obsession with its task
and working with the same bewitched slightly off-hand look as the sea

covering first one place
and then another

and after a while another place

and then another

and another

and another

—Alice Oswald

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Sound barrier

Pop's place in culture has changed drastically. *Marcus Berkman* explains why, after 27 years, it is time to step down as *The Spectator's* pop critic

This is my 345th and last monthly column about pop music for *The Spectator*. I believe I might be the third-longest continuously serving columnist here, after Taki and Peter Phillips. Others have been writing for the magazine for longer, but have occasionally been given time off for good behaviour. You may be astounded to learn that I have not been fired. I, certainly, am astounded. I have been waiting for the tap on the shoulder, or maybe the firm but regretful email, since my first column in May 1987. Eventually I came to realise that the less the editor of the time was interested in my subject, the safer I was. As sheer delight in survival morphed into freakish longevity, I decided it was best to maintain a low profile, to the extent that when the 25th anniversary of the column loomed a couple of years ago, I asked Liz Anderson, legendary arts editor and tireless moral support to any number of anxious columnists, to say nothing to anyone. It's not that I didn't want people to make a fuss about it. I'm not that modest. It's that I didn't want people to make a fuss about it and then fire me straight afterwards.

This year, though, I have started to feel that I have said almost everything that I have to say on the subject, possibly several times. Once it becomes hard work to write a column, it won't be long before it becomes hard work to read it. I have also spent a decent chunk of the year in *The Spectator's* offices leafing through dusty old binders for a book I am compiling for Christmas 2016, entitled *The Spectator Book of Wit, Humour and Mischief*. Reading so many wonderful columnists in intense bursts, you see that even the best of them eventually runs out of steam. In my case, I suppose, I could

also say it was an age thing, except that it wouldn't be true. I was 27 when I started writing this, and I am 55 now, but I was an unusually crabbed, creaky and ill-tempered 27-year-old, who already felt left behind by the way pop music was developing, and preferred the music of his own teenage years, as almost everyone does. This hasn't changed much. I still think hip-hop is a waste of ears. Grunge was spectacularly uninteresting. Of Britpop I now listen to only Blur and Supergrass. And so on.

The truth, and the problem for any such columnist, is that there's far too much music out there for anyone to keep a handle on, and pop follows what I learned this week is called Sturgeon's Law, after the science-fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon. This states that in every arena of artistic endeavour, 90 per cent of everything produced is crap. All you can do is find the 2 per cent you like and listen to that, which I do with pleasure, every day. But I have always been aware that my 2 per cent is probably not your 2 per cent, and it may not actually be anybody else's 2 per cent. All men are islands, and our taste in music makes us particularly small, isolated islands separated by vast unnavigable stretches of stormy sea. This is why people still love going to gigs: because for one night only, they are surrounded by strangers who love this music as much as they do. Then it's back home, where everyone tells them to turn that bloody racket down.

Pop's place in culture has changed drastically during my tenure. When I was growing up and buying *NME* and *Sounds* every week, there was no such thing as a pop column in *The Spectator*, and newspapers ignored the music as though it wasn't there. Then the baby boomers took over the

media, Live Aid happened, Bono started wearing those sunglasses, Sting released an ever more pompous string of jazz-inflected albums no one played more than twice, and it became clear that pop had captured the mainstream. At the time we assumed that this would be a permanent state of affairs, and indeed, Bono is still wearing those sunglasses. But the music has drifted back out of reach and away from people's lives. Even substantial stars of today, the Sam Smiths, the Lana Del Reys, are listened to only by their core constituencies. How many new songs are there every year that absolutely everyone knows? Half a dozen?

That's not to say that pop music is 'over', as one or two of my friends have been heard to say. They have their Neil Young records and feel that nothing more is necessary. It's

PHOTOGRAPHER: SHEILA ROCK/REX SHUTTERSTOCK



*Long player:
33 years on ABC's
'The Lexicon of Love'
sounds only slightly
less than current*



just that pop's present is unusually burdened by the excellence of its past. Music fashioned long ago for instant gratification has proved to possess extraordinary staying power. Over the years I have met one or two pop performers socially and if I have been drunk enough, I have asked them how it feels to have songs they wrote (in some cases, dashed off) in their youth still being played and loved decades later. And they can't quite get over it either. How did that happen? I bet even Paul McCartney asks himself that question from time to time.

The music industry, delightful behemoth that it remains, squeezes this music dry, of course. I'm not sure there are many manifestations of modern life more dispiriting than the jukebox musical, wherein much-loved hits of yore are attached to a story

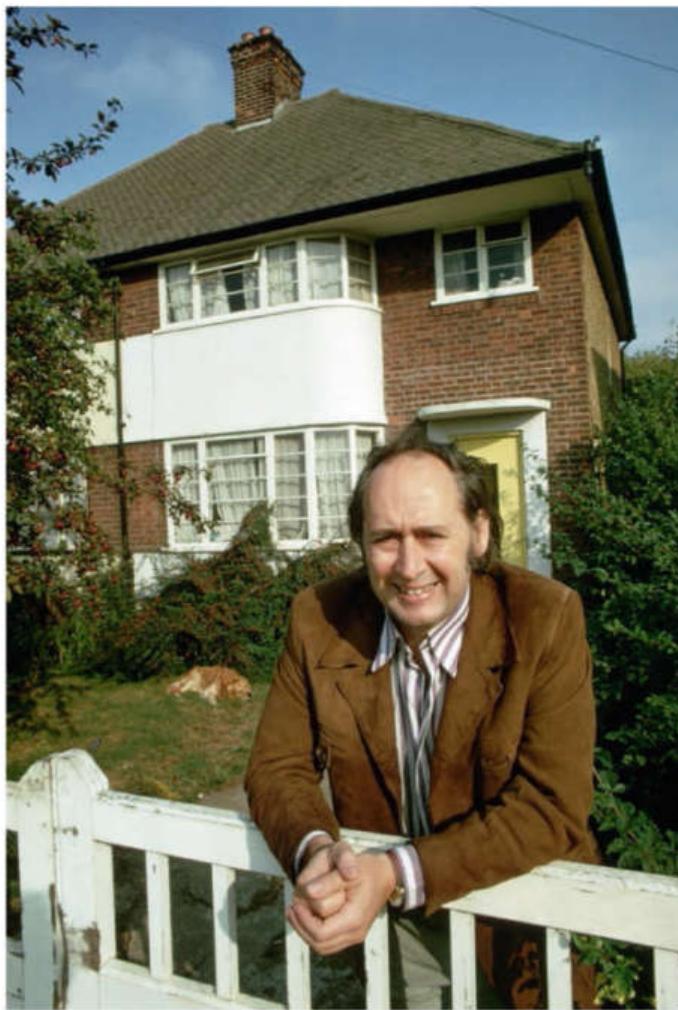
so thin and ridiculous that only Ben Elton could have written it. At the same time, we shouldn't be too hard on people who are just trying to make a living. The other day, I met someone else who had grown up and grown old with ABC's 1982 album *The Lex-*

*My 2 per cent is probably not your
2 per cent, and it may not actually be
anybody else's 2 per cent*

icon Of Love, and we sat and discussed it with wild glints in our eyes. Needless to say, the song we both liked the most was a non-single album track that many people will never have heard of ('Date Stamp', in case you are similarly afflicted). Teenage elitism never dies, and as far as we were concerned, neither does that album. Thirty-three years

on, *The Lexicon Of Love* sounds only slightly less than current. ABC's Martin Fry has never come close to equalling it, but he is still out there, playing it live. It's one of my favourite albums, and it's his pension.

So while I will no longer be writing about music, I will still be obsessing about it, and buying too much of it, and being slightly disappointed by most of it. There is a new Squeeze album out shortly. Fingers are crossed. There's also one by Jeff Lynne, who now calls himself 'Jeff Lynne's ELO' to avoid confusion, although there isn't any. The Amazon order is already in. That said, I heard a song by Gabrielle Aplin on the radio the other evening and that sounded wonderful, so I might get her new record too. She is only 22. It never stops, and for that, I suppose, we should only be grateful.



The Shepperton surrealist: J.G. Ballard outside his house

Film

Concrete poetry

Ian Thomson

That cinema is having another Ballardian moment will surprise few fans. J.G. Ballard, who died of cancer in 2009 at the age of 78, was one of the darkest, most unsettling of post-war British novelists. In a career that spanned half a century from his debut as a science-fiction writer in the mid-1950s, his surreal imagination confronted such subjects as nuclear catastrophe and planetary drought. His discomfiting novel *Crash* (1973) attributed a deviant sexuality to the road accident. Ballard had a taste for 'automobile pornography', according to his biographer John Baxter, and fantasised about having sex with Margaret Thatcher in the back of the prime-ministerial Daimler V8.

In 1991, I called on Ballard at his home in Shepperton off the M3, where he had lived for 30 years. Shepperton had been attacked by Martians in *The War of the Worlds*, and in his fiction Ballard often tried to complete the task that H.G. Wells had begun. (His last published novel, *Kingdom Come*, unfolded amid the tarmac flyovers

and underpasses that ring Heathrow and Thames Valley suburbia.) Immensely courteous, Ballard poured extravagant measures of whisky and spoke, among other things, of his love of surrealist art. His imaginary landscapes, influenced by the surrealist painters Giorgio de Chirico and Max Ernst, remain among the most haunting in English literature; the term 'Ballardian' has now entered the language. We became friends. Ballard sent me photographs of his cat and postcards of paintings by the Belgian painter Paul Delvaux. In the *Telegraph*, to my delight, he reviewed a book I wrote on Haiti ('Perhaps you should seriously think about writing a novel?'), and helped research my biography of Primo Levi. He was extremely kind and generous.

High-Rise, Ballard's great 1975 dystopia of London tower-block madness, has now been turned into a film starring Tom Hiddleston, Sienna Miller and Jeremy Irons. A Wellsian drama of extremity and isolation, the film explores the rat-like behaviour of human beings trapped amid the concrete walls of an elegant 40-storey high rise. Petty disputes between neighbours turn into battles for control of the lifts and stairwells, as the once-luxurious amenities become an arena for technological mayhem. Hiddle-

ton, in the role of the suavely suited Dr Robert Laing, lives on the 27th floor beneath the super-rich at the top and the merely well-off on the lower floors. As Ben Wheatley's disconcertingly glacial film progresses, the tower-block inhabitants retrogress into ever more violent hunter-gatherer enclaves. 'Let the psychotics take over,' declares a character. The London apartment building, in Ballard's distempered vision, is the blueprint for all coming violence, which will be increasingly pointless.

His wayward architectural dystopia had its origin in deep-rooted personal trauma. Born in 1930 in Shanghai into a privileged semi-colonial family (his father was a textile manufacturer), the schoolboy Jim saw his world collapse when the Japanese invaded and he was deported with his parents to Lunghua, a civilian prison camp. There, Ballard's existence became increasingly brutal and illogical: he learnt that human life can be expendable and brief. (For want of food, he ate weevils. 'They contain protein,' his father urged.) The sense of deprivation

'The only truly alien planet is Earth,' Ballard told me

was compounded years later by the shocking early death of his wife Mary from viral pneumonia during a family holiday in Spain in 1964. *High-Rise*, like all Ballard's fiction, was informed by the tragedy. Ballard brought up his three children alone, writing in his Shepperton semi-detached house while they were at school.

Few novelists found poetry in concrete urban architecture: Ballard could. He loved the glittery embrace of modernity and considered Michael Manser's space-age Heathrow Hilton the 'most exhilarating building in the British Isles today'. *High-Rise*, with its hard-edged images of abandoned car parks and drained swimming pools, is a resolutely earthbound fantasy. No British writer did more to release science fiction from the scaly stranglehold of interstellar travel and the green humanoids of American pulp magazines. 'The only truly alien planet is Earth,' Ballard told me.

As a new social order evolves in the 'vertical city', so the residents form a powerhouse of infantile aggressions and class antagonisms. The architect who designed the tower block, Anthony Royal (played by Jeremy Irons), had not foreseen the drama of confrontation between advertising executives, stock-exchange jobbers and other disaffected metropolitans. From his penthouse eyrie he can only wonder at the undermining of civilised conventions. J.G. Ballard, the only surrealist resident in Shepperton, was a moralist troubled by the shape of things to come.

High-Rise is showing on 9 and 11 October at the London Film Festival.

Miles Richmond

(1922 – 2008)



Grazalema from above with Blue Mountains, 1960

oil on canvas 65 x 76 cms 25½ x 29½ ins signed lower right

Founding member of the Borough Group and a student and friend of David Bomberg, Miles Richmond evolved his distinct style by approaching colour as a psychological tool to give form to a world diffused by visible energies. His work embraced all genres, but he particularly excelled at landscapes, which, under his brush grew from a synthesis of Blakeian metaphysics, Cézanne, Bomberg's postwar 'immaterialism' and Richmond's own amateur interest in science.

Exhibition 14th October – 6th November 2015

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MESSUM'S



'Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuñiga', 1788, by Goya

Exhibitions

Novels in paint

Martin Gayford

Goya: The Portraits

National Gallery, until 10 January 2016

Sometimes, contrary to a widespread suspicion, critics do get it right. On 17 August, 1798 an anonymous contributor to the *Diario de Madrid*, reviewing an exhibition at the Royal Spanish Academy, noted that Goya's portrait of Don Andrés del Peral was so good — in its draughtsmanship, its freedom of brushwork, its light and shade — that all on its own it was enough to bring credit to the epoch and nation in which it was created. He (or she) was absolutely correct.

The same could be said of many of the exhibits in *Goya: The Portraits* at the National Gallery. The people in these pictures rise up, as Vincent van Gogh hoped his own portraits would do in the future, like apparitions.

There they are in front of you, these people who lived two centuries ago, with all their poignancy, absurdity, passion and energy.

It is because Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828) made them look so alive that we are interested in the time and place in which they lived. Otherwise, who except specialists in Hispanic history would pay much attention to late 18th- and early 19th-century Spain? But as it is, we want to learn about these fascinating people that Goya shows us (and by reading the excellent catalogue, by the curator Xavier Bray, we can).

This is not to say that, magnificent as the exhibition is as a whole, it is entirely made up of masterpieces. Goya was a slow starter. Although he had formal training, he was essentially self-taught (as he noted).

Some of his earlier efforts have a stiff naiveté that is close to folk art. The main figure in the 'The Count of Floridablanca' (1783) is wooden and doll-like and yet the painting as a whole is oddly memorable. Goya himself — short, subservient and stur-

dy, presenting a painting to his patron and simultaneously pushing himself into the picture — is a more lively presence than the noble subject.

Even while he was following the protocols of aristocratic portraiture, Goya just couldn't stop himself noticing — and depicting — all sorts of extraneous and revealing sights. Cats, their eyes bulging with ferocious greed, wait to pounce on the pet bird held on a string by the dandified toddler, 'Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuñiga' (1788). There are such subversive undertones and notes of sardonic comedy to many of his pictures.

'The Family of the Infante Don Luis' (1783–4) is a whole novel in paint. The syphilitic late middle-aged Infante — younger brother of the king — plays patience by candlelight; beside him sits his beautiful, melancholy young wife. All around stand their entourage — among them a handsome, grinning fellow who may have been her lover.

At this stage, Goya's ambition exceeded his ability. The picture, though haunting, is a spatially incoherent collage of separately

It has always been a mystery why some of Goya's sitters put up with his Lucian Freud-like honesty

studied figures. One of the pleasures of the exhibition is the way you can watch Goya slowly educating himself until he finally reaches full power in his 50s and 60s.

He felt he never did anything better than 'The Portrait of Ferdinand Guillemardet' (1798), the ambassador of the French revolutionary government in Madrid. It certainly is a perfect picture — the sitter coiled with vitality like a coldly efficient human spring, surrounded by delicate air and light. 'The Duchess of Alba' (1797), however, is more engaging: not only a noble heiress but a headstrong, vehement and glamorous presence (there was not a hair on her head, an observer noted, that did not awaken desire).

Goya's (Lucian) Freud-like honesty about his sitters seems so clear in retrospect that it has always been a mystery why some of them put up with it. He clearly despised his last royal master Ferdinand VII, who looks sly, nasty, fat-faced and idiotic in the state portrait of 1814–15. And indeed, at that point, the contradictions of Goya's position as court painter and fearless truth-teller became unsustainable. In old age he went into exile in Bordeaux.

Touchingly and inspiring, he carried on evolving into his 80s. If some late works look strangely like Manet or Sargent, it's because the artists of the future learnt so much from him. As you walk through the exhibition you see him turning himself from an awkward but talented provincial into a master, while simultaneously emerging step by step from the baroque past into the modern world. It's that journey which makes Goya unique.

Cinema

Hats off

Deborah Ross

Suffragette

12A, Nationwide

Suffragette is one of those films in which the parts are greater than the sum. Or, in this instance, the part, singular, as it's Carey Mulligan's central performance that gives this the emotional power it might otherwise lack, and the sense of involvement it might otherwise lack, and she therefore saves the day, thank Christ. This is a story that deserves to be told, and it would have been a tragedy had it entirely got away. Here we do, at least, see that these women didn't just ninny about while wearing elaborate hats, as the stereotype sometimes has it, but were astoundingly heroic and brave, enduring endless rounds of prison and hunger strikes and being force-fed. I truly think I'd only have needed to see the force-feeding trolley coming at me the once to say: 'OK, guys. You've made your point. Didn't want to vote much, anyhow.' I would have also got smartly out of the way of any oncoming horses.

Directed by Sarah Gavron (*Brick Lane*), *Suffragette* is written by Abi Morgan (*Brick Lane*, *Shame*, *The Hour* and *The Iron Lady*, which was also a performance film, come to think of it). It's told through the eyes of a woman at the sharp end; that is, a working-class woman, rather than the higher-class, elaborate-hatted women most versions of these events seem to prefer. Our woman is Maud (Mulligan), who is plain-hatted, lives in Bethnal Green, and works in the laundry she has worked in since she was seven. The laundry is a hellhole involving scalding irons, scalding chemicals and scalding water. Maud's mother, we are given to understand, also worked here and was killed by a vat of such water. Maud works longer hours than the men, for less money, and for a slimy boss who can't keep his hands to himself, shall we say. Maud has a husband (Ben Whishaw) and a young son over whom she has no rights. Maud, in other words, is subject to most of the gender injustices of the time, and it would, perhaps, feel like some kind of injustice roll call, had Mulligan not been able to make us believe that Maud is out there; that Maud is real.

Maud, as it happens, is quite the model employee, and becomes involved in the suffragette movement almost against her will, when she gets caught up in a group of protestors throwing bricks through a shop window in the West End. (The mis-en-scène is terrific; it's not until you've seen Regent Street, circa 1912 that you realise how much you have always longed to see Regent Street, circa 1912.) This is the point at which the suffragettes, who had tried peaceful ral-

lies without getting anywhere, upped their ante to civil disobedience: throwing bricks; bombing postboxes; cutting telephone wires. Maud is pulled into the cause by a workmate, Violet (Anne-Marie Duff), as well as the local chemist, Edith (Helena Bonham Carter, thankfully de-witched for once). Meryl Streep makes an appearance as Emmeline Pankhurst, but it's a bit of a swizz that she has her name on the poster, as she's in it for two minutes, tops. (She also plays Pankhurst as Margaret Thatcher playing Pankhurst; seriously bizarre.) Meanwhile, Maud has come to the attention of the police, and of one officer in particular (Brendan Gleeson) who wants her to be his spy. The cause will not succeed, he tells her. No one will listen to you, he tells her. 'You are nothing,' he concludes, but this, of course, only galvanises her further in the opposite direction.

There are clunky script moments, just as there are clunky plot contrivances, and it is soapy manipulative, particularly when it comes to Maud and her little boy, and particularly when it comes to the manner of Violet's daughter and how she is saved. (The plotting is supremely *Downton*-esque here.)



Her face is one of those faces you can't stop watching: Carey Mulligan in 'Suffragette'

Plus, you don't ever get a proper sense of the movement in its entirety, and the main protest scenes, during which the police brutally beat up the women, and which should have been shocking, never seemed anything other than staged. But as a journey of one woman's political awakening, from meek acceptance through to hardcore fury, it flies. I don't know what it is about Mulligan. Her

Meryl Streep plays Pankhurst as Margaret Thatcher playing Pankhurst

face, as I've said before, is one of those faces you can't stop watching, and she can also get at every particle of a character's thinking and feeling as those thoughts and feelings shift and change. She barely requires a script. Indeed, there's one scene where she wants to make her son laugh, so she dances for him in the rain as he watches from a window. It will make you cry more than any dialogue ever could. So she saves the day, and saves a story that deserved to be told. Hats off to her, and it doesn't matter what type of hat it is. It was never about hats, just so we're clear.

Musical theatre

High and dry

Michael Tanner

Kiss Me, Kate

Leeds Grand Theatre, touring in rep until 21 November

Wozzeck

Royal Festival Hall

Opera North's new production of Cole Porter's masterpiece *Kiss Me, Kate* has been so widely and justly praised that I wonder whether there is much for a week-later reviewer to add. It's not as if the work needs much exegesis or critical commentary, though it may be worth pointing out that what we hear in Leeds amounts to a new critical edition, in which the conductor, David Charles Abell, has played a major role. Musicals have been treated with as little respect as Italian operas were in the 19th century, with arias and whole scenes added or subtracted according to the taste and abilities of the performers, the management's judgment of the initial reception, and the casualness with which manuscripts and orchestral parts have been handled. So Abell has an alarming tale to tell of chances lost and coincidences redeeming them, of tap-dance routines only recently discovered — all the makings, really, of the plot of a musical involving the disinterment of an earlier musical, with scholars fighting for grants and attending conferences in desirable places, etc.

Kiss Me, Kate already involves a musical-within-a-musical, in that the leading pair are played by a divorced couple. This gives rise to some confusion, at least if you're not trained in opera plots, since it's often hard to tell whether the conflicts we are witnessing are taking place between Petruchio and Kate, or between Fred and Lilli. I gave up minding fairly early on, after a study of Ethan Mordden's excellent article in the programme book, and previously his superb account in his authoritative six-volume history of the American musical — why is this writer, encyclopaedic and fascinating both as musical commentator and brilliant novelist, so little known in the UK? The main thing is that this lengthy show, clocking in at slightly more than three hours, has enormous élan and a satisfyingly maintained sense of period. The only blot, which I had already more or less made allowance for before the show began, is American accents, their variability in the course of a single spoken sentence and between and among the performers. Quirijn de Lang, the Dutchman who plays Petruchio, is the worst offender, but in every other respect his performance is so endearing and attractive that it's churl-

ish to mind for more than a few minutes. These people have to look good, to act well, to sing in a half-operatic style, and to maintain unflagging energy, that being the great central quality of all musicals that matter. And they all do, there is no weak link. In *Kiss Me, Kate* there is no sentimentality, just the occasional hint of a sexy melody by Offenbach; it is as starkly unlike the ghastly gooey *West Side Story* as possible. Oh, and somehow Opera North manages to create an atmosphere of backstage grimness (not difficult) and onstage glamour and even sumptuousness, largely thanks to a huge reproduction of the great tapestry of The Lady and the Unicorn, and lavish period

Kiss Me, Kate is as starkly unlike the ghastly gooey *West Side Story* as possible

costumes. Please let's have more dry-eyed productions of members of this art form.

Which brings me to Berg's *Wozzeck*, and the question of how moist-eyed we should be at the end of what is almost certainly the greatest opera of the last century. In the past decade London has seen the perverse and refrigerating Royal Opera production; a strange hotchpotch of a semi-production at the Royal Festival Hall, superbly performed but violently gimmicky; and the marvellous ENO production, the most moving I have experienced.

The Zurich Opera has now done one of its one-night stands, a concert performance, sold mainly on the strength of Christian Gerhaher's assumption of the title role, again at the Festival Hall. In the event, Gerhaher was unable to take part owing to illness and his place was taken by Leigh Melrose, a performer who everyone has seen because he is so versatile, but who pays the price and no one can think what they've seen him in. Well, now they can: he was magnificent (he was *Wozzeck* in the ENO production, but in English, of course), utterly involved in the role and articulating perfectly too. And he was surrounded by a strong cast, with Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacke gleefully telling *Wozzeck* that he is a good man but lacking in virtue, and so forth, as if Berg had written the role for his particular variety of oily malice; and Lars Woldt a deranged doctor, reeling off his list of invented illnesses. The Drum Major of Brandon Jovanovich could easily play his role in a performance of Büchner's play, and has a rich voice too. Gun-Brit Barkmin came on super-strong as Marie, less convincing in repentance than in erotic responsiveness — and crucially there was no child among the performers, only a chorus member (did Zurich Opera really need to bring a chorus of 46 with them?) to sing the last few words of the opera, so Marie's lullaby and other scenes with the boy fell flat.

In fact, I'm not sure that *Wozzeck* can make its full impact in a concert performance, as so many operas clearly can. Not even when the orchestra is as fine as the Zurich one, and the conductor as probing and precise as Fabio Luisi. I have found him an uneven conductor, but here he was at his best, and he built that final elegy for *Wozzeck* to a stunning climax. That's where the tears come in. We watch horrified as *Wozzeck* is driven to murder and suicide, but when the great D minor interlude gets under way it is as if we are to mourn the passing of a great hero. Many people have criticised Berg's giving way to his superabundant store of feeling, and like them I think it was a mistake, but once one knows it, one wouldn't be without. And that's how we shall go on feeling.

Theatre

Mark of genius

Lloyd Evans

Farinelli and the King

Duke of York's Theatre, until 5 December

Medea

Almeida, until 14 November

Philippe V was a Bourbon prince who secured the throne of Spain using his family connections. Claire van Kampen is a writer who relied on the same method to secure a West End opening for her play about Philippe. It stars Mark van Kampen (aka Mark Rylance) as the charmingly dotty Frenchman. Philippe was a manic depressive who regarded his Spanish subjects as a puzzling inconvenience. He had no interest in governing them and preferred to laze around the countryside, looking at stars, listening to music and indulging his eccentricities. We first meet him in bed trying to hook a fish supper from a goldfish bowl. Courtiers secretly plot to oust him while the queen scours Europe for a singer capable of cheering him up. She hires Farinelli ('little baker'), who warbles to him day and night in his rural retreat. Farinelli was blessed with the finest vocal kit in Europe but he resented working in a rustic backwater so he filled the longueurs by cultivating a chaste romance with the queen. That's about it, plot-wise. And there's little character development in this threadbare frock-fest.

Yet it's a major work of art for two reasons. First, the set is among the costliest and loveliest things I've ever seen in a theatre. The rear of the stage has been rebuilt as a miniature auditorium with three pillared galleries overlooking the playing area. The facings are painted a gorgeous deep blue-grey with austere gilded decorations. The



Like observing a child absorbed in a solitary game: Mark Rylance as Philippe V in 'Farinelli and the King'

panelled roof is scattered with winged stars like butterflies or twinkling comets. The sumptuous restraint of this design is stunning. The lights are artfully satisfying as well. Two huge candelabra shimmer with naked flames (a nod to *Wolf Hall*) and they're supplemented by conventional spots concealed so effectively I couldn't locate them. The effect of this virtuoso display is to immerse us totally in the 18th century.

Secondly, there's Mark Rylance. His turn as the deranged, bumbling king has no obvious antecedent. He isn't a physical clown. Glances, tricks and comic gestures are alien to him. Atmosphere and rhythm are his materials. His pace is slow, estuarial. He has some of Stan Laurel's ruminative sweetness but he also has the endearing, fatalistic candour of a tramp. He gives the king sudden bursts of emotion, of laughter, of sadness and anger. Because he deadpans every line it's hard to convey the hilarity of his complaint, for example, that in Spain the Spaniards serve only Spanish food. 'It's all they do.' In a fit of lust he tenderly gropes his wife and then discards her. 'Stop that,' he scolds her. Oddly enough, he doesn't trigger gales of mirth throughout the show but he creates the sense that a huge laugh may come at any moment. It's transfixing. I almost felt I wasn't watching a 'performance' at all, a calculated imposture that tricks you into feeling amused, but a character study that belongs to nature, not to art. It's like observing a child absorbed in a solitary game. He resides in this world while participating in some inscrutable other dimension which the viewer can access only through the child's blurred reflections and responses.

Rylance, luckily, is on stage nearly all the time but whenever he departs the tension dissolves and the script settles into its meagre components and becomes a tepid love triangle featuring a singer who grudgingly accepts a king's patronage while fumblingly assaulting a queen's virtue. The dialogue, which makes no concession to antiquity, is funny for all the wrong reasons. An official offers Philippe a quill and parchment and asks him to 'sign off' on the 'defence budget'. Oodles of cash have been hurled at this show and its 18-strong company of actors

Rachel Cusk's Medea isn't a bad piece of yuppie soap, but it's hardly Medea

and musicians. *Evita* would have cost less. I hope they make their money back.

Medea, adapted by Rachel Cusk, gives us Medea as Rachel Cusk. She's a yummy-mummy writer whose trendily bearded husband has been caught cheating and she's jolly fed up with him and he's jolly fed up back. Transplanting this ancient tale to the present day does it irreparable damage. Jason was a prince with a kingdom to bequeath and Medea's slaughter of their children destroyed his dynastic ambitions. Those concepts are meaningless today so what we're left with is a fruity portrait of a fracturing marriage with some atmospheric lighting thrown in. Medea's spiky, pugnacious language is a treat to listen to and Kate Fleetwood is brilliantly cast as the sexy vixen whose face breathes death. (She'd make a great 007.) But the play dodges the part that makes Medea Medea. The killings are presented in an oblique and confusing way perhaps because the

audience is aware that posh Islington mums simply don't murder their kids. That apart, this isn't a bad piece of yuppie soap. But it's hardly *Medea*.

Radio

A day in the life Kate Chisholm

It's probably blasphemous to admit that I've never thought very much of John Lennon's music. Common sense tells me it must be good but it's never made much of an impact on me no matter how hard I've tried to appreciate it. If I like a Beatles song, I usually discover it's by George. But the discovery from a radio trailer (reluctantly, I'll have to admit they do sometimes work) that Lennon would have been 75 this week was shocking enough (how could he ever be that old?) to make me tune in on Thursday night to *John Lennon's Last Day*.

Stephen Kennedy's docudrama for Radio 2 (produced by James Robinson) took us through the events of 8 December 1980, from the moment Lennon woke up in his seventh-floor apartment in the Dakota building on West 72nd Street in New York to the fatal shots that killed him, delivered by Mark Chapman from a .38 revolver hidden under his coat. No attempt was made to explain Chapman's actions. We were simply taken through Lennon's day, as if walking side-by-side with him. The effect was startlingly vivid, making real how brutal that ending was.

Lennon got up early that day, we were told by the narrator (played deadpan by Ian Hart), before going for a haircut at his favourite barber's, ready for a photo shoot later that morning with Annie Leibovitz (the result was that extraordinary picture of a naked John curled up against a fully clothed Yoko). Then he gave a radio interview with RKO to promote his first album in five years, *Double Fantasy*, in which he says, poignantly, 'My work is not finished until I'm dead and buried and I hope that's a long, long time.'

At four o'clock John walked out of the Dakota building on his way to a recording studio on West 44th Street. He had to wait for a few minutes for his car to arrive, by which time a small group of fans had gathered round him asking for autographs, one of whom was Chapman. A photograph exists of Chapman with Lennon, taken by an amateur photographer (long before selfies). Chapman failed to carry out his plan at that time (offbalanced by Lennon's chatty friendliness) but he was still there, lurking in the shadows, when Lennon returned at 10.50 p.m., and this time he accomplished his deadly mission, shooting Lennon in the back four times at close

range. His fifth shot missed.

This was all very different from a Radio 4 drama, which would probably have filled in the back story, amplified the details, given us more of the history. Here, instead, we had long clips from Lennon's songs, carefully spliced in to add to the spooky sense that Lennon had no idea what was ahead of him.

Another hugely influential, if troubled, figure from the last century was celebrated on the World Service on Tuesday. Naomi Grimley's profile of *Eleanor Roosevelt* took us to the upper Hudson valley where the former First Lady retired after the death of her husband, Franklin D. Roosevelt. From there she would often broadcast to the nation, one of the first to realise the potential of radio to reach into people's homes and get your message across by speaking in the most direct way possible to voters. She began with a most terrible high-pitched screech but after training became a powerful voice on air.

It was Eleanor who broadcast to the nation on the evening of 7 December 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, encouraging Americans to get behind the war effort: 'We know what we have to face and we know that we are ready to face it.' She held her own press conferences, which only women were allowed to attend, wrote a weekly newspaper column for years entitled 'My Day', blogging about her life as First Lady, and later was chair of the committee that drafted the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet in spite of all her efforts in forging a life for women beyond housework and children (she was criticised for not playing the wife and not overseeing the housekeeping at the White House) she ended up doing adverts for margarine on TV, as if all her achievements were as nothing.

'It makes me cringe,' Allida Black, editor of Eleanor Roosevelt's papers, told us. We heard a clip. Back comes the high-pitched, whiny voice, the housewifely dialogue, the phoney humility. So different from the poised earlier broadcasts in which she rallied young women to demand the vote and told them, 'I have faith in you.'

On *The Conversation* this week (Monday, World Service) Kim Chakanetsa talked with two women who were dealing with missing family members. Visaka Dharmadasa's son disappeared 15 years ago while serving with the Sri Lankan army against the Tamil Tigers separatist movement. She still believes he is alive somewhere, and now campaigns for peace and for other families who are searching for family members who have gone missing. It's not like when someone dies, she said. 'Normally, we say, the time heals. But this, no, the time doesn't heal.' Her pain was tangible. She still keeps the chocolates she had ready for her son when he was next on leave in her freezer.

Television

Faking it

James Walton

Close to the Edge (BBC4, Tuesday) feels very much like an idea conceived during a particularly good night in the BBC bar. Why not take the 'scripted reality' methods of such youth hits as *The Only Way Is Essex* and apply them to a group of over-65s living in Bournemouth?

So it is that the chosen oldies are given one main characteristic each, and required to act out events from their own lives — events that might or might not have happened if the cameras weren't there. Or as Tuesday's opening caption rather optimistically put it, 'Some of the scenes have been constructed purely for your enjoyment.'

Which scenes these were, the programme didn't of course specify. But judging from the wooden way in which much of the dialogue was delivered — even including the word 'hello' — I'm guessing it was quite a lot.

We did get occasional moments of the promised enjoyment, most supplied by John, a comedian by profession, but here cast in the role of Older Man Looking for Love. Early on, he approached two women of his age in a supermarket and made a few jokes about how fat he is: a procedure he unexpectedly described afterwards as 'chatting them up'. Later, another female peer failed to cheer him up as much as she hoped by assuring him that 'some women like them cuddly', especially when she added 'I'm not one that does.'

Even so, this sort of show naturally stands or falls on whether you mind a television documentary giving itself permission to make things up — and, at the risk of being on the wrong side of history, I think I do. About halfway through, John told friends that one reason he was nervous about dating again was that he'd nursed his wife 'to the bitter end', and didn't want to risk going through the same experience with anybody else. By being both so obviously heartfelt and so wholly believable, it was a remark that stood out vividly from almost everything else in the programme.

Otherwise, *Close to the Edge* followed



'Do you know if the food's any good in this place?' *Roz Chast*

the usual television policy of rejecting all those hideous stereotypes about old people behaving like old people, preferring to emphasise how they're up for everything, from founding businesses to hurtling along on zipwires.

Sadly, this only goes to show that TV still hasn't taken any notice of a letter of complaint written by Grandpa in *The Simpsons* as long ago as 1990. 'I am disgusted with the way old people are depicted on television,' he protested. 'We are not all vibrant, fun-loving sex maniacs. Many of us are bitter, resentful individuals who remember the good old days when entertainment was bland and inoffensive.'

On the plus side, though, this does mean that Grandpa would have loved *Rooney: the Man behind the Goals* (BBC1, Monday) — which accorded its subject roughly the same level of reverence as Sir Alastair Burnet's royal documentaries used to give theirs.

Taking the Sir Alastair role here was Gary Lineker, who began by stressing the mystique that surrounds a 'man watched by millions, known by few'. Sticking to the royal-doc template, he then revealed that in private Wayne Rooney is a loving family man, who likes nothing better than playing with his kids and joshing affectionately with wife Coleen. Meanwhile, all those old tabloid tales were dispatched in a couple of enigmatic euphemisms about him being a bit silly when young, followed by repeated assertions of his new-found maturity.

The programme certainly reminded us what a footballing prodigy Rooney was. (When he became the youngest player to score for England, Coleen, already his girlfriend, was still at school.) Yet, even here, there was an unmistakable sense of pulled punches. Several former England teammates remembered thinking that he could end up alongside Pele and Maradona as one of the indisputable football greats. So why hasn't he? The question went entirely unanswered, not least because it also went entirely unasked. Instead, Gary simply invited a few more celebs to praise Rooney to the skies and tell us again how mature he now is, before moving into his peroration about the man's place among 'an elite group of international stars who transcend the game'.

In fact, there's no denying that Rooney did come across very well — but then again, that was transparently the idea. The closing credits included a shamelessly big thanks to Paul Stretford, without mentioning that Stretford is Rooney's famously powerful agent (and a man who may not have much to learn, even from palace officials, about controlling a documentary). In other words, I have a strong feeling that *Close to the Edge* might not have been the BBC's only scripted reality show of the week — with *The Man behind the Goals* also containing some scenes that were perhaps constructed purely for our enjoyment.

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The Hague

By Laura Freeman

What a fate it is to be hung next to the most famous painting in a gallery. To be overlooked, a framing device, just out of shot of every selfie taken in front of 'The Ambassadors' or 'Mona Lisa'.

The painting immediately to the left of Johannes Vermeer's 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' in the Mauritshuis is Gerard ter Borch's 'Combing for Lice'. The weary mother in this close interior has none of the pouty lusciousness of Vermeer's pin-up, but no Madonna ever cradled her bambino with as much maternal tenderness as this Dutch *huisvrouw* inspects her son's blond head.

Thanks to Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*, all most visitors want from the Mauritshuis is Vermeer and Carel Fabritius. His 'Goldfinch' is a funny little thing, with a beak like a Toblerone triangle and dusty plumage. Tick those two off your list first, then spend your visit with Jan Steen's 'Oyster Girl' — how daintily she sprinkles her salt, how conspiratorial her half-smile — or Frans van Mieris's 'Teasing the Pet', a portrait of a poor, pained spaniel puppy having his ear tugged. Once you have finished with the *fijnschilders* — the fine painters — on the first floor, play spot-the-guinea-pigs in Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens's 'Garden of Eden'.



Look out below: one of The Hague's gargoyles

The Hague is a painterly city. The dark, patterned brickwork of the surviving 17th-century townhouses have the heavy impastoed texture of a Rembrandt. They are particularly appealing in low autumn sun. Now red, now golden, now tanner's brown, now black.

The streets follow the shape of what were once sand dunes, wiggling through the city in no great hurry to be anywhere. Don't meander too aimlessly, though — the bicycles don't give you much warning. A trill of a bell and

a Dutchman — 6ft 6in tall — trundles past towing a wooden wheelbarrow filled with his three small children, all with Ter Borch blond hair. When it rains, the gargoyles on the city's art nouveau houses do their worst, so beware stopping to take your Instagram shots beneath one. Do, however, convince a local to say the word 'gargoyles'. It comes out, charmingly, as 'goggles.' 'Look at those gurgling goggles!' exhorts our guide.

The house of the architect J.P.J. Lorrie, on the canal at 26 Smidswater, has the most photographed letterbox in the city: an art nouveau cat, skinny as a Siamese, with a doorbell where its whiskers would be. Meanwhile the collection of M.C. Escher, the Dutch artist-mathematician whose work is celebrated in an exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery until 17 January, finds a fitting home in the former Winter Palace of Queen Mother Emma of the Netherlands. It has one of those staircases that doubles back on itself as it runs up three flights of the entrance hall. Escher might have drawn the Queen Mum climbing the stairs upside down and meeting her doppelgänger coming the other way.

An hour here peering at Escher's precipices and improbable perspectives and you are dizzy with vertigo. Fill your head with Escher and your stomach with Dutch gouda and you will have very strange dreams.

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— **Rory Sutherland, p69**

LIFE

High life

Taki



Let's take it from the top: Seville is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. The capital of Andalusia, it is situated on the banks of the Guadalquivir river, and has a history that predates the Greeks and the Phoenicians. (Almost as old as Milton Keynes, but slightly more exciting at night.) The place reeks of charm and old-world splendour, its palaces, cathedrals, forts and magnificent spaces reflecting a civilisation that worshipped a Christian God and an all-conquering Christian army. Seville Cathedral is the biggest temple in Spain and the third largest of the Christian world, exceeded only by Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome and St Paul's in London. And it was built on top of the great mosque while conserving la Giralda, the minaret it replaced once the Moors had been chased out. This was back in 1248, and it illustrates why we're on a losing streak. When the Muslims negotiated the surrender of Seville to the Christian forces, they asked that the great mosque and its minaret be destroyed in order not to be soiled by people like you and me. But Don Alfonso, the winner, threatened to kill anybody who dared destroy the beautiful edifice. Just like those nice guys of the Islamic State in Palmyra, *n'est-ce pas?*

Going around the city of 800,000 is a revelation in civilised living. There is virtually no sound of traffic or strewn litter, and most of the tourists flocking to the fortresses and palaces are Spanish. Yes, there are Chinese, but they are outnumbered by the locals. South Saharans are few and I counted only about 15 women wearing the hijab. The city has very wide, imperial boulevards, beautiful parks and gardens, and narrow streets that evoke mystery, romance, bullfighting and flamenco.

This is Papa Hemingway and Ava Gardner country — baroque-style façades and the oldest bullring in the world. Built in 1761, the place reeks of blood and sand and tragedy. Leopold Bismarck, Tim Hoare and I visited it briefly. Tim had trouble walk-

ing because of a bad knee and I explained to the patient Spaniards shuffling slowly behind him that he was the greatest English matador, recently injured in the ring. They nodded politely but with slight amazement. Tim is not built like Manolete, nor does he have the late, greatest-ever matador's sad countenance.

Although I am not an expert in tauromachy, the five greatest bullfighters ever are, in my opinion, Belmonte, Joselito, Manolete, Dominguin and Ordonez, and if anyone disagrees they can meet me at the sports palace in Amsterdam and I'll settle the score. The greatest opening line of any book is that of Barnaby Conrad in *The Death of Manolete*: 'On August 28, 1947, in Linares, Spain, a multimillionaire and a bull killed each other, and plunged a nation into mourning.' It beats Jane Austen's 'It is a truth universally acknowledged' and leaves 'Call me Ishmael' for dust. And it makes 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times' seem second-rate. Bravo, Barnaby, a friend of mine and author of *Gates of Fear*, the bible of bullfighting.

The previous afternoon I had gone with my friend John Rigas to the Plaza Espana, a 200-metre semicircle with two high towers at each end, and explained to some knowing tourists that the butler to the then King Alfonso became one of the world's greatest marathon runners as he had to sprint 200 metres back and forth at least 40 times a day while serving his master. Some of them believed me.

The reason for my visit was a delight in itself: the Prince Augusto Ruffo Di Calabria's 60th birthday. Augusto has too many titles to list in these here pages, so I will mention only that he's also the president of the Corviglia Club in St Moritz,



'These will lessen the side effects from the pills you're taking to reduce the side effects from those pills I prescribed to ease the side effects of...'

where I first met him. He's married to an Austrian princess and has three beautiful children. His family has as much in common with the Hiltons and Kardashians as a popinjay does with a male lion. I spent three delightful days and nights with them, culminating with a grand dinner dance at the Casa de Pilatos, probably the grandest private palace in Seville, where 190 of us sat in a square courtyard filled with candles and flowers under white marble mosaics. Something tells me that I've been in more beautiful settings, but it also tells me that that was in a previous life. I sat next to Debonnaire Bismarck and watched the birthday boy's brother-in-law, Heinrich Fürstenberg, do a torrid *paso doble*, and listened while Nick Scott spoke beautiful Andalusian Spanish to the servers, who understood not a word. It was a wonderful three days in a beautiful city, hosted by an Italian prince of the old school. The only sad note is that parties like that are bound to go with the wind sooner rather than later. The aforementioned scum like the Kardashians are the future, and that's not good news for the poor little Greek boy.

Soon I'm off to where all that bad stuff comes from, New York, but only to see the first major exhibition devoted to my hero, Papa Hemingway, which opened at the Morgan Library and Museum last week. It might not be Seville but it's the next best thing.

Low life

Jeremy Clarke



It rained all day long last Friday in Provence, and it rained all night, and on Saturday morning it was still raining. The rain fell out of a lowering, field-grey blanket of a sky. After breakfast and a wash, we assembled in the living room wondering what to do with ourselves on a day such as this. There were four of us: a couple en route for England who arrived in a Land Rover packed to the roof with possessions; our hostess; and me.

The ugly breeze-block house with a

large tiled terrace was perched on the side of a hill. Fountains sprayed in unlikely directions from leaking joints in the rain gutters. The rain came down faster than the drains could take it away from the terrace, flooding it. The unmade road below the house was a torrent. Lightning brightened the living room, flickering continuously, as in a horror film.

We lit the fire and sat quietly and cosily around it absorbed in our phones and iPads like a lot of teenagers. A raindrop fell from a damp patch on the living-room ceiling and splashed on to my thigh. A report came in from the kitchen of a large puddle with no discernible source spreading across the floor. Another was creeping across the floor in the hall. A crack of thunder directly overhead rattled the glass in the windows and made us look up from our devices.

Around noon the deluge eased a little. The bouncing curtain of water became merely heavy rain. You could see between the raindrops. We took a vote and decided to venture out for a drive and perhaps a glass of pastis in a village bar somewhere.

What makes Provence attractive is the quality and clarity of the sunlight. Take that away and the place is as dreary as anywhere else in the rain. The endless rows of vines, recently roughed up by mechanical

grape harvesters, drooped miserably. Pan-tiled old stone villas, fabulous in sunshine, now appeared unkempt and dilapidated. Stony debris washed down from unmade side roads created hazards on the sealed roads. The rain-blackened countryside was as deserted as it might have been in times of war or plague. Villages known for their rustic charm were oppressively dreary.

In one of these we saw a light on in a bar and parked. Before going in, we made a pretence of being cultured as well as pissheads by venturing inside a nearby church, whose door was ajar, for a quick look around. Inside, I put a euro in a slot in the wall and, possessed with nearly an identical spirit to the one in which I sometimes buy a lottery ticket, lit a candle. Seeing this, the other chap in our party, Charlie, put a euro in the slot, took a candle, and put it in his pocket, saying that he couldn't obtain such good-quality candles as that for 75 pence in England. So I prayed my one-euro prayer for Charlie's one-euro soul.

The tiny bar was full of rained-off, shouting boar-hunters. We ordered a glass of pastis each and tried to hear ourselves speak above the noise. A woman in black leather trousers, her face streaked with mascara, came in out of the rain and went around laboriously planting a noisy kiss on every cheek in the bar. Then she gravely imparted a short message to the barman and took her affectionate and meticulous leave with a second round of embraces and kisses. Then the boar-hunters knocked back their drinks and everyone in the bar was planting kisses on everyone else as well as shouting. Then they were gone, and their absence strangely depressed us, and we sat and stared out of the window and watched the stair rods bouncing off the village square and war memorial. Then we drank up and drove back to the house for a bowl of home-made spinach soup by the fire.

In the afternoon, Charlie, who gets restless indoors, said he had a chainsaw in the back of the Land Rover, and sod it, why didn't he and I go outside and chop up that fallen pine tree he'd spotted on the hillside. He had recently bought the chainsaw online, brand-new, for a bargain £99, and he was so pleased with it, he said, he was

recommending it to all his friends. So out we went into the rain and the lightning and spent the afternoon on the muddy hillside, soaked to the skin, slicing up the trunk of this pine tree, and splitting the rings with his maul, also new, and at only £40 another online bargain. And I have to say that chainsawing and swinging that maul in the rain and the mud, far from being a soggy trial, turned out to be the happiest afternoon I'd spent for a long time.

Real life

Melissa Kite



'The last owner who tried to ride his own horse got tanked,' said the trainer, looking up at me as I perched on Darcy, knees nearly up to my chest like a pixie in the racing saddle.

'After three circuits he threw himself off into the muck heap.'

'I get the picture,' I said, running my gloved hand against Darcy's neck. 'Please, look after your mother,' I whispered to her. She was perfectly calm beneath me. Because I raised her, I have always felt like I can trust this horse with my life. I was about to find out exactly what that meant.

It is all very well trusting a horse you

I felt like I was riding on the back of thunder. Who says man cannot fly?

have raised from a yearling while cantering her around the woods. It is quite another when that thoroughbred has grown into a gleaming racehorse.

Suddenly, at that point, a thought comes into your head that you believe you have invented and that no owner before you has ever had: 'I know! I am going to ride my own racehorse! I am going to be like Elizabeth Taylor galloping The Pie to victory!'

I told the trainer of my plans. The trainer is a veteran jockey who has seen people like me come and go. It turns out I am not the first person since Velvet Brown to think of riding her own racehorse. He has seen lots of women like me take leave of their senses, and the odd City boy too.

His response was far more accommodating than I had expected. No doubt he has discovered that the best way to disavow an owner of the notion that they can become the next Frankie Dettori is to let them climb aboard.

He agreed I should join them at 10 a.m.,



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for the last ride out. When I arrived, he greeted me with his arm in a sling and a huge cut above his left eye, still bleeding.

'My god, what have you done?' I asked. 'Oh this?' he said, absent-mindedly. 'Shoulder got pulled out again. Pushed it back in myself.'

I took the precaution of packing myself into a back protector. The look wasn't quite as stylish as Liz Taylor but I could work up a pair of white breeches and a snazzy silk top. Darcy was led out to the mounting block and up I went. Perched like a pixie, I followed three jockeys out of the yard.

As we hacked into the common for a warm-up, the female jockey in front turned to give me a tip. 'You'll find it easier if you put your stirrups up,' she said.

'Up? I don't think I can get my legs any more bent than this.'

As we approached the gallops she turned round again. 'When you see the shed coming round for the second time start pulling up, OK?' I nodded. 'We're going to help you out. Try to stay at the back but if something goes wrong and you need to pass, shout out.'

I nodded. Then I leaned forward and whispered again to my girl. 'You need to look after me.' Darcy was inscrutable. Calm as you like, and totally self-possessed. As soon as we were on the red sand, the girl called out to see if I was ready and when I

shouted back 'yes' something happened that I cannot quite describe.

I have been riding horses since I was four years old. I have galloped more times than I can count. But by gallop, I mean gallop normally, on a normal horse. Not a thoroughbred a few removed from the great Nijinsky.

What happened when we took off on those gallops will go down as one of the greatest experiences of my life. I have never felt anything like it. Darcy went upwards as if spring-loaded and then forwards at a speed I could not fathom. I swear, I felt the engine roar. She took me round that track so fast and furious I felt like I was riding on the back of thunder. Who says man cannot fly?

The stirrups weren't quite short enough. And my 43-year-old legs need some toughening up. The athleticism required to be a jockey is just staggering. It was all I could do to force myself, second by second, against all rules of gravity, to stay on. If my legs gave way, I was going to fall out the side at 40mph.

As fast as we were going, time slowed down so that the circuit and a half felt like it went on for ever. And even though my legs wouldn't have held me on for much longer, I never wanted it to end.

When I got home I sat on the sofa and thought, 'I will never be the same.' I am counting the hours until I get to fly again.

Long life
Alexander Chancellor



It has taken years, but finally England has joined the rest of the United Kingdom and other countries around the world in declaring war on the plastic carrier bag. This week for the first time English supermarkets are being forbidden by law to give plastic bags

Ninety per cent of Londoners wanted to abolish one of the greatest conveniences of their everyday lives

away for free. From now on they will have to charge 5p for every one of them. It is the beginning of the end. The plastic bag is heading for oblivion. The most useful shopping tool of the last half-century will soon, I imagine, be extinct.

It seems only appropriate at this point to say how wonderful plastic bags have been. They are the most useful carriers ever

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invented — strong, light, capacious and absurdly cheap to produce. Life without them will never be so easy again. In future, anyone wanting to buy a few things from the supermarket on the way home from work will have to remember to take a reusable shopping bag out with him in the morning. Anyone stocking up with food at the weekend will have to set out with a supply of his own bags in the car. I already try to do this, but usually forget. Oh, how I will miss the plastic bag.

But the remarkable thing is that the end of the plastic bag, when it happens, will not have been an imposition from above but a fulfilment of the popular will. A consultation exercise carried out eight years ago found, for example, that 90 per cent of Londoners were in favour of banning plastic bags altogether. Ninety per cent of Londoners wanted to abolish one of the greatest conveniences of their everyday lives! Who can say that people are always selfish?

The popularity of the new measure against plastic bags, the docile acceptance of having to pay for something that always used to be free, is evidence of how responsive people can be to campaigns for the wider public good. The campaign against smoking has been successful, too, but smoking kills individuals, which is rather different. Plastic bags just threaten the world.



'I see you having to make some important lifestyle choices.'

That threat, however, is impressive. The statistics are enough to alarm anyone. Hitherto in Britain, billions of plastic bags have been given to shoppers each year, and they have all got thrown away. About 60,000 tons of them have ended up in landfills, where they can take more than 400 years to decompose — a process that promotes climate change by releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Throughout the world, between 500 and 1,000 billion plastic bags are thought to be consumed annually, more than a million a minute. And those that don't reach landfill sites get blown about on the wind from the North Pole to the South, littering every continent and polluting every sea.

Those floating out at sea have a devastating effect on marine life. Turtles eat

them, thinking they are jellyfish, and die in consequence. Altogether, more than 100,000 mammals, including whales and seals, and up to one million seabirds are thought to be killed each year from eating or getting tangled up in plastic. And like the poignant photograph of a dead child on a beach in Turkey that got the campaign to admit refugees to Britain going, it took a distressing image to spark the revolution against plastic bags.

It was the sight of some albatross chicks dying from eating plastic on a beach in Devon that eight years ago upset Rebecca Hosking, a BBC camerawoman, so much that she persuaded shopkeepers in her hometown of Modbury to give up plastic bags altogether, thus launching the campaign of which we are seeing the results today.

Discarded plastic bags may occasionally have their uses. I am told that in some parts of Africa there has developed a cottage industry in which people turn them into hats. But on the whole I have to say that even I am convinced that they are not a good thing. So I will try not to mourn them. I will stock up on sturdy canvas bags and try to remember to take them with me to the supermarket. Or maybe I should do the sensible thing and start getting my groceries delivered to my home instead.

Spectator Events presents: Is the EU bad for business?

Tuesday 20 October | Royal College of Surgeons, London WC2A 3PE | 7p.m.

David Cameron is set to hold the in-or-out referendum on Britain's future membership of the European Union as early as next June, but what will it mean for British business? Join our panel of experts to debate if the EU is indeed bad for business and have your say in the Q&A session. Chaired by Andrew Neil.

Speakers include: Dominic Cummings, director of the 'No' campaign, Will Straw, executive director of the 'Yes to Europe' campaign
Helena Morrissey, founder of The 30% Club, Andy Bagnall, director of campaigns, CBI



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EVENTS



BREWIN DOLPHIN

There's no doubt about it: I'm an addict. A BBO addict. Since the Bermuda Bowl began, nearly a fortnight ago, the first thing I do each morning is log on to Bridge Base Online to follow the action. And I stay logged on until play stops at about 3 p.m. (7.30 p.m. in Chennai). I'm twitchy if anything takes me away from my laptop; I even watch it on the bus.

But who can blame me, when our boys are playing so magnificently? Where they've really excelled is in the bidding. David Gold has always told me it pays to bid aggressively — and he and the team are certainly proving the point. They keep putting their opponents under pressure, obstructing them, pushing them to the 5-level and then defeating them by a trick. Take this example from the match against France. Gold was South, his partner David Bakhshi was North:

Dealer West

Both vulnerable

♠ K 7 6 4	
♥ 6 3	
♦ A 5	
♣ A K Q 8 3	
♠ A J 8	♠ Q 10 9 2
♥ AKQ 9 8 7 4	♥ 10 2
♦ K Q	♦ J 10 9 8 7 4
♣ 9	♣ 2
♠ 5 3	
♥ J 5	
♦ 6 3 2	
♣ J 10 7 6 5 4	

West	North	East	South
2♣	pass	2♦	pass
2♥	Dble	pass	3♣
3♥	4♣	4♥	5♣
pass	pass	5♥	all pass

West opened a strong 2♣. In the other room, Andrew Robson and Tony Forrester had an uncontested auction: 2♣ – 2♦ – 3♥ – 4♥. Not at this table. First, Bakhshi found a double. Then he found a raise to 4♣. And then Gold — undeterred by the vulnerability — stuck his neck out and bid 5♣. Poor East (Thomas Bessis) thought for ages before bidding 5♥. Bakhshi led the A♣ and switched to a trump; Gold carefully played the ♥5 rather than his ♥J so that declarer would have no entry to dummy. One down. At the time of writing, England are in the semi-finals. If they carry on bidding like this, who knows... We may be out of one world cup, but could we be on the verge of bringing home another?

SPECTATOR WINE CLUB JONATHAN RAY

We have three remarkably fine bottles from the Wine Company this week, each a classic example of its type. First, the Michel Guilleminot Blanc de Noirs Brut Champagne NV, a fabulous fizz from the Vallée de l'Aube. Fresh, vibrant and fruity, with a delicate mousse and a touch of biscuit and brioche, this mouth-filling, 100 per cent Pinot Noir gives many a Grande Marque a run for its money. It certainly beats any supermarket own-label champagne hands down. £21 if you buy six bottles, down from £26.99.

The 2012 Sumaridge Chardonnay is from South Africa's Upper Hemel-en-Aarde Valley near the whale-watchers' paradise of Hermanus. I know this 'Heaven and Earth' valley well and it's home to some spectacular wines — Hamilton Russell, Bouchard Finlayson, Newton Johnson, Ataraxia to name a few

— and Sumaridge is right up there with the very best. A gold medal winner at the International Wine Challenge, it's full of ripe, rounded fruit, a touch of vanilla and plenty of zesty citrus and creamy quince. £16.50 if you buy six bottles, down from £22.

Finally, the 2011 Wheeler & Fromm 'Clayvin Vineyard' Pinot Noir from one of this capricious grape's sweet spots: the Brancott Valley, Marlborough, New Zealand. They get great purity of fruit here and great complexity too, thanks in part to 15 months in French oak. With bitter and sour cherry flavours, damsons and plums and a beguiling whisper of smoke, this glorious Kiwi Pinot is in the peak of condition. Little wonder that Decanter named it in its top 50 wines. £24 if you buy six bottles, down from £29.50.

There is a taster case of all three and of course delivery is free.

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Chess

Black death

Raymond Keene

Joseph Henry Blackburne was the leading British tournament player towards the end of the 19th century. It could be said that he challenged Steinitz for world matchplay supremacy, though he could not hold his own with the great Austrian strategist.

A monumental new book by chess scholar Tim Harding represents a huge contribution to chess literature. Harding has produced a full biography with many games, and has done far more than just reproduce 19th-century commentary. In this week's game he pinpoints a critical fulcrum, missed by previous commentators, where Blackburne could have seized the advantage. If I have one regret about this splendid volume, it is the near absence of complete crosstables of Blackburne's superlative tournament performances, such as his astounding first prize at Berlin in 1881. Despite this, no good chess library can afford to be without this book.

Steinitz-Blackburne: London match (Game 1) 1876; Ruy Lopez

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 a6 4 Ba4 Nf6 5 d3 d6 6 c3 Be7 7 h3 0-0 8 Qe2 Ne8 (see diagram 1) **9 g4** Continuing the plan begun at move 7, but weakening the kingside. 9 0-0 and 9 Nbd2 are safer options. **9 ... b5 10 Bc2 Bb7**

This bishop would probably be better placed for attack and defence on the e6-square. **11 Nbd2**

Qd7 12 Nf1 Nd8 13 Ne3 Nf6 14 Nf5 g6 **15 Nxe7+ Qxe7 16 Be3** 16 Bh6 N8g7 17 h4 is more direct but leads to nothing after 17 ... f6.

16 ... N8g7 17 0-0-0 c5 18 d4 This advance was widely praised but actually there is a serious flaw in the calculations. **18 ... exd4 19 cxd4** (see diagram 2) **19 ... c4** This is the fulcrum of the game. Much the best continuation here is 19 ... cxd4 20 Nxd4 Rac8 when White should probably reconcile himself to 21 f3 d5 after which Black has absolutely no problems. In fact White may suffer due to his kingside advances now that Black has freed his game. The key point of Black's play is that the natural 21 Kb1 runs into

Diagram 1

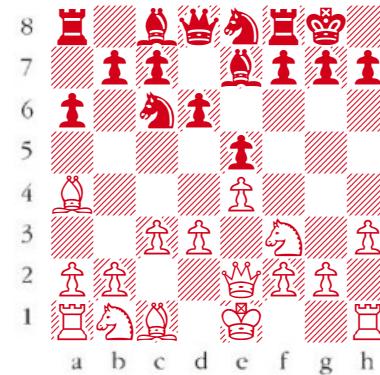
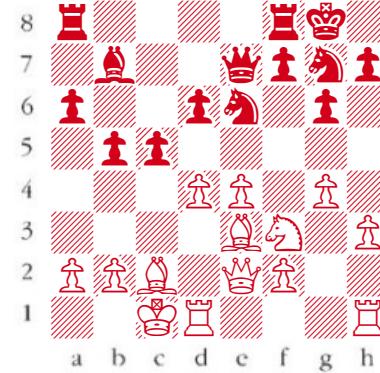


Diagram 2



Nxd4 22 Rxd4 (22 Bxd4 Rxc2 is worse) 22 ... Ne6 23 Rdd1 and now after 23 ... Rxc2! 24 Qxc2 Rc8 25 Qd3 Nc5 Black stands much better. **20 d5 Nc7 21 Qd2 a5 22 Bd4 f6 23 Qh6 b4** Black has no time for this but even after a defensive move such as 23 ... Nge8 or 23 ... Qd7 he would probably not be able to withstand the white attack. **24 g5 f5** Complete collapse. Relatively best was 24 ... Nge8 25 gxf6 Nxf6 26 Rhg1 Qg7 to exchange queens. **25 Bf6 Qf7 26 exf5 gxf5 27 g6 Qxg6 28 Bxg7 Qxh6+ 29 Bxh6 Rf6 30 Rhg1+ Rg6 31 Bxf5 Kf7 32 Bxg6+ hxg6 33 Ng5+ Kg8 34 Rge1** Black resigns

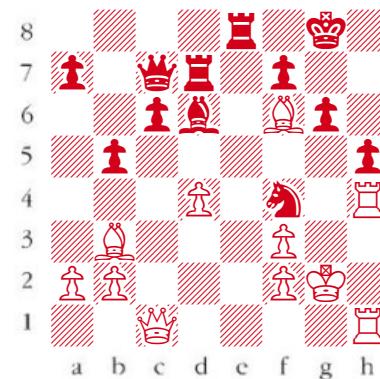
Joseph Henry Blackburne: a Chess Biography, by Tim Harding, is published by McFarland.

PUZZLE NO. 382

White to play. This is from Blackburne-Schwarz, Berlin 1881. What is the best way to deal with the knight check? Answers to me at *The Spectator* by Tuesday 13 October or via email to victoria@spectator.co.uk or by fax on 020 7681 3773. The winner will be the first correct answer out of a hat, and each week there is a prize of £20. Please include a postal address and allow six weeks for prize delivery.

Last week's solution 1 ... Bxf2+

Last week's winner R.F. Tindell, Great Shelford, Cambs



Competition

Threesome

Lucy Vickery

In Competition No. 2918 you were invited to submit a poem composed entirely of three-letter words.

'This is the most difficult comp you have set and has driven me mad!' said Adrian Fry. It was a nasty assignment, I admit, but it could have been so much worse. Take John Fuller's wonderful poem 'The Kiss': not only is it made up entirely of three-letter words; it also has three words per line in three three-line stanzas.

Given the potentially dispiriting technical nature of the challenge, I was surprised by both the number of entries and the standard (high). There was a lot of skill and wit on show and it was unusually difficult to separate submissions into winners and losers. I very much admired Frank Upton's translation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 into three-letter words; there was nice work, too, from Chris O'Carroll, Julie Steiner, Bill Greenwell, Sylvia Fairley, John Martin, David Silverman, Max Ross, Gerda Roper and Nicholas Hodgson.

The prize-winners, printed below, are rewarded with a very well deserved £25 apiece. W.J. Webster pockets this week's extra fiver.

The sea was low, its hue
Now all but dun;
Fog hid the far off bay,
Hid, too, the sun.
The old man sat and saw
The wan day dim;
His eye was dry but all
Was sad for him.
For joy had met its end:
His lot was rue.
The sea hut tea was set
For one, not two.
W.J. Webster

The day Tom Pow saw Liz, his old mum die
Low fog had put its sad arm o'er the sea;
Sad was the dew o'er fen and bog and lea,
Sad was the sun and sad too was the sky.
All saw him sit, all saw how Tom did cry
For her who was his joy. His gem was she.
She was the air for him, his law, his key;
All saw him sob; yes, sob and ask God why.

But who can ask his God for why and how?
Why did our God let Eve sip sin and fun?
God did not aid Tom Pow — it's not His way —
But all saw Tom get ill and beg and bow.
The day Liz met her God Tom got his gun.
And why did God not aid him? Who can say?
Frank McDonald

Gin, pot and sex?
You bet. Why not?
The day was mad
And sad, all rot:
Too wet the sea,
Too wan the sun,

Too hot the air,
Too dim the pun,
Too big the job,
Too far the pub,
Too old the gag,
Too raw the rub.
Too bad, but now
The joy and fun
For two who rut
Can run and run.
Basil Ransome-Davies

Yes, man may own his dog, his car,
But not the sky, the sea, the air;
Men buy and cut ash, elm and yew,
Hew, log and use old oak, box, fir.
Men err: few see and get the cue.

For all are kin but not all win:
Far off, see Leo, yon big cat,
Too old for sex, now let him die,
His day has run, his cub has won —
Can you, can any man say why?

Our day may run, our sun may set
And dye the sky raw red, its hue
Fog hid, dim lit; let sad old age
Cry out 'Lay off, not yet, not yet!'
Has god now set our due end too?
Alanna Blake

Sob not nor rue
The odd sad day
But aim for joy,
Too few are gay;
Too oft has woe
Her own way had
And men cut low
Are far too sad;
Dab not thy eye
And cry you not,
Ask not for aid
Nor rue thy lot;
The old can ail,
Yea, ail they may,
Aim you for joy
And win the day.
Alan Millard

Big Sal set off for tea,
'Yes, eat all you can see...'
She did; she was not shy
And tho' the pie was dry,
The cod was off, but hey!
Our Sal did not say 'nay'.

The hot pot was too hot
But Big Sal ate the lot.
The pud, too big for one,
She ate; nor did she run,
For she was fat, not fit,
And all she did was sit.

'The sea...' (the day was hot),
Her cry 'I'll dip, why not?'
Two ton, she was ill met,
The end was sad and wet.
Sylvia Fairley

NO 2921: FICTIHEW

You are invited to submit clerihews for fictional characters. Please email entries (up to three each), wherever possible, to lucy@spectator.co.uk by midday on 21 October.

Crossword

2232: Ups and downs by Lavatch

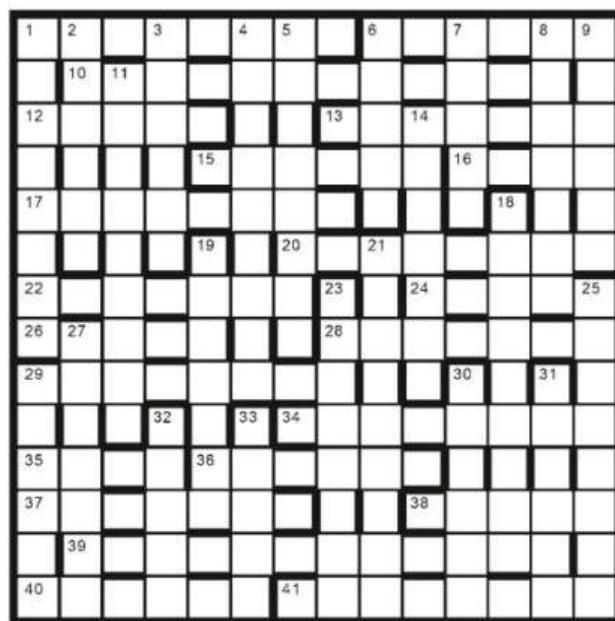
The unclued lights, in one case paired, are all suggested by a thematic phrase (two words), which is set out in an appropriate form in the grid and must be highlighted.

Across

- 1 Brass and slate vessel (8)
- 6 Really humid round townships (6)
- 10 Ham cast chose plays — they cause discomfort (12)
- 12 Society cuts old displays (5)
- 13 Ape-like evangelical with outstanding pledges (7)
- 15 Beer and staple food one leaves in wood (6)
- 17 No gin in a sozzled artist (8)
- 20 Picture takers like river in Iceland (8)
- 22 Draw close, at first, in nocturnal habit (7)
- 24 See cuckoos and dogs (5)
- 26 Overcook, taking week to act like Ramsay? (5)
- 28 Qualification for business, having trouble in capital (7)
- 34 Rampant elitism's most disgusting (8)
- 35 Ten jockeys needing a mount (4)
- 37 Snakes by golden castle (7)
- 38 The foreign fashion for singer (5)
- 39 Test hearing, with everyone in favour (12, two words)
- 40 Theft of inferior horse unacceptable (6, hyphened)
- 41 Part of dance considered in stages (8)

Down

- 1 Southern country, internally corrupt, gets sanctions (8)
- 2 Glowing wood on home fire finally (6)
- 29 He struggles to comprehend compilers in *The Spectator* (6)
- 31 Part of brain contains silicon particles (6)



A first prize of £30 for the first correct solution opened on 26 October. There are two runners-up prizes of £20. (UK solvers can choose to receive the latest edition of the Chambers Dictionary instead of cash — circle the word 'Dictionary'). Entries to: Crossword 2232, The Spectator, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP. Please allow six weeks for prize delivery.

Name

Address

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SOLUTION TO 2229: GNOME

The PROVERB (35) (in *ODQ*), associated with the KENNEDY (19) FAMILY (31), was 'A rising tide lifts all boats'. EDIT (36) is 'A rising tide'. WORT (9), POOLS (15D), BUT (21D), GUT (26) and LEEK (39) are 'lifted' boats. EDIT was to be shaded.

First prize V. Kendall, Ware, Herts

Runners-up Geoffrey Telfer, Shipley, W. Yorks; Andreas Fabian, Dunsden, South Oxon



Status Anxiety

Lunching with the enemy

Toby Young

The mood at the Conservative party conference this week was a little subdued, and no wonder. As those who watched the television coverage will know, everyone entering the secure zone had to run a gauntlet of potty-mouthed protestors. It's not easy to celebrate after you've just been showered with spit and called a 'Tory murderer'.

On Tuesday, as I made my way to the convention complex, I came up with a brainwave. Instead of just walking through the police barriers, eyes glued to the ground, I would invite one of the protestors to have lunch with me. My plan was to persuade them that I wasn't an evil scumbag, but someone who shared many of the same values as them. It would be a small victory in an otherwise unsettling few days.

Sure enough, I was met with a chorus of abuse as I approached the barrier. A line of police officers stood between the protestors and me and I asked one of them if it would be OK if I wriggled through. 'On your head be it, mate,' he said, stepping aside.

'You've probably never met someone like me before and I've never met anyone like you,' I said to the first group I came to. 'Why don't I buy one of you lunch and we can spend some time getting to know each other?'



Surprisingly, 'right to buy' wasn't the only Tory policy that she approved of

The man closest to me, a white Rastafarian with a torn T-shirt, took umbrage at this. 'Of course you've never met anyone like us,' he said. 'We're far too common for a Tory squire like you.' He then broke into a chorus of 'Common People' — 'I want to sleep with common people' — which had everyone around him in stitches. But a middle-aged, grey-haired woman agreed to talk to me.

As we strolled down the street, looking for a restaurant, she told me she didn't want any lunch. 'The policies of this government make me so sick, I couldn't eat anything,' she said. But she agreed to let me buy her a cup of coffee. We settled on a curry house opposite the convention complex.

She was a 63-year-old private maternity nurse whose last job was looking after the baby of a Premier League football manager and she'd obviously done quite well for herself. She lived in a housing association flat, but was intending to take advantage of the government's extension of the right to buy so she could leave something to her son. 'I'm not a hypocrite,' she said, catching the look of surprise on my face. 'I told Jeremy Corbyn that I wish he had that policy.'

As expected, she was a huge fan of Corbyn and had joined Labour in order to vote for him. But, surprisingly, 'right to buy' wasn't the only Tory policy she approved of. She also wanted Britain to regain control of its borders — 'I think there's too many foreigners in London' — and on some issues, such as foreign aid, she was to the right of the government. 'I think we should look after our own people first,' she said.

Yet in spite of this, she was still happy to brand Conservatives 'scum'. 'Those people going in there, they don't give a toss,' she said. 'They live in a nice little world, where everything's nice. Why did they go into politics? These people — George Osborne, David Cameron — look like they're full of their own self-importance. You should only go into politics if you want to improve the world, if you've got something you really care about.'

'But they do care,' I said. 'You may disagree with their policies, but, believe me, that's why they went in to politics. To improve the world.'

She looked completely flabbergasted by this. She cited the benefit cuts as evidence that Tories were 'evil' — 'Forcing people on their deathbed to go back to work' — and threw in Nick Clegg for good measure. Before she joined Labour she'd been a Lib Dem, but became disillusioned after the coalition was formed.

In the end, I didn't manage to convince her that Tories were in politics for the right reasons. But she certainly confounded my expectations. She wasn't a 'Trot' or an 'anarchist', and some of her political views were closer to Nigel Farage's than Jeremy Corbyn's. My reluctant conclusion is that she — and the other protestors — don't need much of an excuse to engage in demonisation and two minutes of hate. The wolf is in all of us, prowling around the unconscious, always looking for permission to be let out.

Toby Young is associate editor of The Spectator.

MICHAEL HEATH



The Wiki Man

Digital code of ethics

Rory Sutherland

A few years ago, in the week before Christmas when supermarket sales are at their highest, staff at one branch of a leading British chain regularly did the rounds of local competitors' shops buying up their entire stock of Brussels sprouts.

It was, in its ethically dubious way, an interesting experiment. You might assume frustrated shoppers would merely buy all the other things on their list and then go somewhere else for their sprouts. They didn't. As the perpetrators suspected, spending 30 minutes in a shop knowing that you'll eventually have to make a separate trip to buy sprouts feels like wasted time — so people promptly left to find a shop where they could buy everything in one place. Their branch, with its sprout monopoly, enjoyed record-breaking sales that year.

But here's the thing. They only did this once. Wiser heads prevailed. Perhaps the management were keen ethicists who realised that sprout-hoarding would violate the categorical imperative or (more likely, I think) they were afraid they'd get rumbled. Either



We are unwittingly delegating a huge amount of unscrutinised power to programmers

way, they instinctively felt the activity was wrong.

Some people will blur ethical lines occasionally; what's rarer is when bad behaviour becomes widespread. This is what is so bizarre about the VW emissions affair. For a car company to tweak cars before measurement ('teaching to the test' as it's known) might be expected; when officially testing a car's mpg, you give it your best shot by turning off the air-conditioning and pre-charging the battery. I understand this. But to extend the ruse to a point where millions of cars carry 'defeat devices' seems astonishing.

Why did no one in the car industry cry foul? Contrary to what journalists think, people in large businesses usually span a wide spectrum of political views and opinions; Germans are high-minded about environmental issues to the point of sanctimony (remember the Brent Spar affair). This is a company so Teutonically perfectionist that for many years it lost countless sales in the US by refusing to add cup-holders.

Perhaps everyone believed, rightly or wrongly, they had the tacit approval of regulators for what they were doing? Or was it a case of pathological altruism, where engineers felt they were doing God's work by reducing CO₂ emissions with smaller diesels, and believed any price in other emissions worth paying? Or perhaps very few people knew what was going on?

This last possibility seems implau-

sible — until you remember one thing. The 'defeat device' is not a device at all: it is some lines of additional software in the engine control unit. The addition of a physical device to cheat the test would have required approval from many different divisions of the company, some of whom would have spotted the ethical and reputational risks. But if you want to rig up some dodgy ECU software, all that's theoretically needed is one or two unscrupulous people and a keyboard. The software they produce is largely incomprehensible to anyone else.

We are unwittingly delegating a huge amount of unscrutinised power to programmers. Once, computers largely performed dull repetitive tasks with great speed and precision; today we are delegating complex human judgments to software and to the small clique of atypical people who write code. Most do a fine job, but among them must be a few rogue actors who wouldn't see anything wrong with buying up everyone else's sprouts.

The truth is that most companies have little clue what is inside the software they produce. Do any of the editors of the newspapers reporting this affair have the slightest idea about the inner workings of their publications' mobile applications, or how they handle readers' data? I suspect not.

Rory Sutherland is vice-chairman of Ogilvy Group UK.



Q. What do you do when you are so cold at a party that you cannot enjoy it? At a recent 21st in Hampshire the theme was Summer of Love so I was in a beaded catsuit and my friends were in cotton minidresses with bandanas and thin velvet coats. But the theme Arctic Explorers would have been more appropriate. There were heaters in the marquee but they only made a difference if you stood in front of them and only one person at a time could do so. The food and music were brilliant

but all we could think about was how cold we were. Our host was cold herself but she kept the house locked up.

— B.G., London SW3

A. Nothing like this should happen if a proper party planner is employed. Bentleys says, 'Women hate the cold and often arrive not wearing very much whereas men are dressed in twill dinner jackets. There is a notion that a tent will warm up when it is full of guests but it will not and it kills the party if the women have to go home.' For this reason, Bentleys prefer Thermobile heaters which duct warm air around the marquee. Meanwhile Bear Grylls advises that, since up to 50 per cent of body heat leaves through the head, you would have done better to wrap the velvet coats around your heads.

Q. On a recent sunny poolside holiday, we noticed that one of our new friends had a very visible 'blackhead' on his chest alongside a collarbone. He had clearly not noticed it, and would have surely dealt with it had he done so. That this unsightly beast was still there indicates that he is not a vain man. How, Mary, would you have let him know?

— E.B., London

A. Blackheads are maddening since humans have been programmed since apeman days to want to remove them as part of grooming. No one can relax while one is throbbing away on a fellow guest's semi-naked body. The correct protocol is for one guest to scream with excitement as though she has just noticed the blackhead and for the others to cluster forward admiringly as

they congratulate the offender on his lack of vanity. Before he has had time to think, another house-party member, already equipped with cloth or wet wipe, should put him at his ease by coming forward saying, 'Don't worry. I'll do it. I've just removed one exactly the same size from my own collarbone.'

Q. Those who, like your correspondent of 3 October, have attended a friend's 'pretty dire' recital, may like to know of the tactic of Nadia Boulanger on such occasions. Backstage after the concert, she would lay a hand on each shoulder of the performer, look them straight in the eye, smile and say, 'My dear, you know what I am thinking.'

— D.C., Kyiv

A. Thank you for supplying this invaluable tip.

Drink

The toast of Manchester

Bruce Anderson



It will seem an ungrateful comment after the lunch which I am about to describe, but Manchester has some way to go. In the Midland Hotel, the principal Tory conference hotel and a grand edifice redolent of civic self-confidence from an earlier era, the northern powerhouse could sometimes be mistaken for a 40-watt light bulb. The business centre had been closed for the duration of the conference. The management person who told me this had enough nous to wilt under my incredulous stare. But it remained closed.

At a bar, two girls struggled to do half of one girl's work. Whenever anyone tried to pay by plastic, inaccuracy and chaos reigned. The girls were not to blame. Increasingly panic-stricken, they looked sweet and were obviously under-educated and under-trained. But they were hopeless. It was horribly reminiscent of Blackpool.

The lunch. It had two aspects. The first was a superb wine list which would have graced any restaurant in the world. The second, the food. It was pretentious: nouvelle cuisine in

The main course took an hour and a half to arrive. We hardly noticed and did not complain, because of the wine

portions which would not have satisfied one of L.S. Lowry's stick men. That said, there was nothing wrong with the taste. Indeed, the ceviche of sea bream would have justified a Michelin rosette. But the main course arrived an hour and a half after we sat down.

We hardly noticed and did not complain, because of the wine. Our host, a prosperous Mancunian who has been a one-man northern powerhouse for some decades, was in a mood to gloat. A devotee of George Osborne, he wanted to celebrate the end of an era of civic decline and hideous council architecture: the bitter harvest of Labour dominance. On his way in, he enjoyed bantering with the anarchists, telling one dungareed girl that if she changed into a skirt and washed her hair, she would scrub up into something better than cat food on hind legs. 'Please move along, sir, we've enough trouble with this lot as it is,' said a senior-looking bobby, hardly able to contain his laughter.

We started with a Criots-Bâtard-Montrachet '99. It was delicious, but not remotely ready. We were drinking about 30 per cent of the wine. It

needed at least another five years. That was not true of the first red wine, a 1990 La Lagune. This was claret at its almost best. It had the subtlety and power of a wine from a serious château which has reached maturity after a happy childhood, combined with the intellectuality which only cabernet sauvignon can provide.

We moved on to a more powerful but less intellectual wine. Ornellaia, a super-Tuscan, is a successful attempt to produce a St-Emilion in Italy. But to those of us with an incurably Left-bank palate, it lacked the finesse of the La Lagune.

The host was delighted by the way the debate was going, for the next wine was a 1995 Cheval Blanc. Was this not as intellectual as any Pauillac? One could only agree. Barely ready, it was magnificent: the best wine we drank. We concluded with a Vieux Château Certan 1982, a classic Pomerol. As one would expect from such a great year, it was still fine. If you have some, there is no tearing hurry to drink it up but no reason to delay doing so.

Lunch was followed by an expedition, to visit what was left of Victorian Manchester, when the city's powerhouse status was taken for granted. The John Rylands Library: the original university buildings, where one almost expected to see Tait and Tout, gowned and conferring, as they planned a history school to rival Oxford or Cambridge: the paintings of Pierre Adolphe Valette, who taught Lowry but was a very different artist. Mist, spires, canals — he was Manchester's Monet. This was a great city and will be so again.



'It's his last day tomorrow, so I expect he'll be dressing down.'

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Normal

'Is Nicky Morgan too "normal" to be the next prime minister?' asked someone in the *Daily Telegraph*. That would make her abnormally normal, I suppose, at least for a PM. 'Who and what dictates what is normal?' asked Justine Greening, the International Development Secretary, earlier this year, but, like jesting Pilate, did not stay for an answer. She posed the question because she does not like communities where 'women normally stay at home, they normally get married very early, they normally wouldn't vote, they normally don't run a business'. They have been warned.



Yet most people would prefer not to have an *abnormal* heartbeat, no matter how far out of the ordinary their opinions were. *Normal* in the sense of 'ordinary' became common in English from about 1840, so the *Oxford English Dictionary* noted in 1907 when it got around to words beginning with *n*.

A correlative is *queer*, and indeed *normal* has been used to mean 'heterosexual' for at least a century. Daniel Farson

(1927–97), once famous as a television personality and later as a remarkably energetic homosexual, published in the last year of his life a fat autobiography called *Never a Normal Man*. The funny thing was that the phrase had not been used of him, but of his father Negley, the author of an even better-selling memoir, *The Way of a Transgressor*. Like Dan, Negley had been an alcoholic and had committed himself to an asylum in Switzerland. The director told him: 'Keep your conflicts, Mr Farson, it is better for you never to be a normal man.'

Nicky Morgan is certainly not an alcoholic. Nor does Justine

Greening call for more women to become alcoholics (interesting though it might be as an election policy). She would like women not all to stay at home, refrain from voting or keep away from business. She wants her *normal* to supplant other people's.

My husband tells me that only a decade ago doctors quite often included slightly opaque initials in patients' notes: *PFO* for a drunken patient who'd been injured falling over; *TTFO* for 'Told to fuck off'; and, at least in Norwich, *NFN* 'Normal for Norfolk'. It couldn't happen now that transparency is the new norm.

— Dot Wordsworth



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